

DECEMBER 1944: A BRITISH MISSION IN NORTHERN MOLDAVIA

Gheorghe Onișoru

National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism, Bucharest
gh_onis@yahoo.com

Rezumat: După 23 August 1944, România a intrat într-o nouă fază a istoriei sale, condiționată de regulile Convenției de armistițiu din 12 Septembrie 1944. În decembrie 1944, britanicii au decis să trimită o misiune ACC în Nordul Moldovei, cu Ted Masterson și Wheeler, pentru a obține informații asupra acestui teritoriu complet controlat de armatele ruse.

Abstract: After the 23rd of August 1944, Romania has entered into a new phase of his history, being under the Armistice (12 September 1944) convention rules. In December 1944, was sent a British ACC Mission (with Ted Masterson and Wheeler) to Northern Moldavia to get and retrieve information about this area, entirely under the control of the Russian Army.

Résumé: Après le 23 Août 1944, la Roumanie est entrée dans une nouvelle phase de son histoire, être sous les règles de la convention d'armistice. En Décembre 1944 les Britanniques envoyèrent une ACC mission (avec Ted Masterson et Wheeler) au nord de la Moldavie pour obtenir des informations sur ce domaine entièrement contrôlée par l'armée russe.

Keywords: ACC, Northern Moldavia, Russian occupation, armistice

The Romanians big hopes from the evening of August 23rd, 1944, linked firstly to the matter of concluding peace and return to a democratic regime, dissipated soon. The heroic gesture by which Romania back weapons and has passed in the Allies' camp, contributing substantially to shorten the war and opening the way to the Soviet troops to the Balkans and Central Europe, has been rewarded with the *de facto* occupation of the country by the Red Army.

After the agreement was signed on the night of September the 12, 1944 any trace of illusion has disappeared. Romania enter into a phase in which the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission become the main political instrument of decision.

By far, the most complicated situation was encountered in Moldavia. Here, strong fighting has been taken place before the August 23rd, 1944, the authorities had been discharged, and chaos ruled all over the place.

This situation was going to deteriorate as the weeks passed, and Soviet authorities took the opportunity to install here an obedient administration, dominated by the pro-communist forces. But, for the people remaining in the area, more dangerous than political evolution was economic status, the fall of the standard of living and the daily uncertainty generated by abuses committed by Soviet troops, theoretical allies, which continued in the autumn of 1945.

In fact, even Soviet authorities have contributed to the preservation and amplifying of this general status, including through a series of administrative measures.

We give only two examples. The first is the gauge widening of main railway lines in the Moldavia that were connecting the region to Bucharest, this fact contributing to the *quasi-total* control of Soviet authorities on traffic of goods and people, but which has also paralyzed the secondary railway lines¹. In addition, on 9th of November 1944 it was published a decree law by which all of the goods seized in the Soviet Union had to be restored in five days². The term very brief and the realities in the country opened the way toward new abuses by the USSR.

Practically, we can assume that Moldavia was almost separated from the point of view political/administrative from the rest of the country, and this fact has perpetuated up toward the end of the year 1944. Communists took advantage of it, and Soviet authorities have encouraged and sustained them.

In fact, on October the 28th, 1944 only four prefects in Moldavia were confirmed by the Minister of the Interior, the rest of them being install by "local political authorities and install under the auspices of Soviet military authorities"³. For the chaos to be even greater, on the market has begun to circulate in addition to national currency, the Romanian "Leu", the rouble and the "Leu" of the Soviet Command, which has contributed to the acceleration of inflation⁴.

Although at the beginning of December 1944 has been instated a new government, led by general Nicolae Rădescu, which has decided to put an order in the country, especially since it had been over three months since the events on August 23rd, 1944, Moldavia was returning very slowly toward normality⁵. This is the reason

1 For an overview see Gheorghe Onișoru, *România în anii 1944-1948. Transformări economice și realități sociale* [Romania during 1944-1948. Economic transformations and social realities], Bucharest, Fundația Academică Civică Publishing House, 1998.

2 "Monitorul Oficial" [Romanian Official Gazette], Part I, no. 260 of 9 November 1944, p. 7238-7239.

3 The four prefectures were in the county of Botoșani, Neamț, Putna, Covurlui – Central Historical National Archives (C.H.N.A.), Fund Ministry of the Interior, File no. 13/1944, f. 5-6.

4 A ruble was quoted at 100 Romanian „Lei”, and one “Leu” of Military Command of Soviet troops was quoted at 5 Romanian „Lei” - „Viitorul”, 2 september 1944.

5 A report issued by the Ministry of the Interior from November the 8th, 1944 captures realities from Moldova and South Bukovina: „In Moldavia and South Bukovina can not say that we

why American and British Missions within the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission have tried to obtain information on the spot. In this context took place the mission of Colonel Ted Masterson between 13th and 15th of December 1944.

Colonel Masterson was accompanied on this visit by Lt. Col. Wheeler, both of them having been members of UK Mission within the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission. Officially they had dealt with, the first the economy, the second the agriculture. The experience of the two during the three days in which they have tried to arrive in the northern part of Moldavia may be reconstructed today in basis of the report made by Masterson on his return to Bucharest⁶.

Here's the report in question in full version:

„Allied Control Commission Rumania

British Mission

Journey to Moldavia

December 13th to Dec. 15th inclusive

Lt. col. Masterson and Lt. col. Wheeler

On account of motor car failure had to return to Bucharest after reaching a point 15 km north of Focsani.

Weather

The weather was very bad during the first two days. Strong cold wind blowing on the 14th with the thermometer at -10 degrees C. On the 15th wind died down. Temperature -6 degrees C.

State of Roads

Road to Buzau – paved highway.

have a Romanian state administration. Authority of the state is much reduced. In some most important centers and county such as Dorohoi, Suceava, Rădăuți etc., this authority is undermined. Prefects and the mayors were appointed by Soviet Command. Most of them do not fulfill the conditions required by law, in particular conditions of the study. All of these prefects and mayors have been surrounded by a administrative staff without any kind of education. Many of those officials appointed by them, in important posts, such as those of subprefect position, are Jews, others are arguing again with justice. For example the case of prefect Alexiuc and quaestor Babotă of Iași, first having only 4 primary classes and the second, a former Sergeant First Class, who was sentenced to hard work for murder ... In the cities, as well as in the villages, operates a police composed of local elements. In particular in the cities this police is composed by members of the Communist Party, without any speciality. The police teams sent by General Direction in Moldova have been desarmed and arrested. Mentioned for example the cases from Bacau, Bârlad and Iași” - Central Historical National Archives (C.H.N.A.), Fund Ministry of the Interior, File no. 22/1944, f. 1-7.

⁶ The report can be found in British archives - Public Record Office, FO 371/48577.

Buzau to Focsani, surface frozen. Going fairly good. Could have average 40 kms an hour with a good car. Believe that the road to Bacau is also fairly good when frozen. Could average 40 kms an hour along the portion covered by us.

1st Day

Arrived at Ramnic Sarat at 6,30 p.m. R. Sarat is a town of 15.000 inhabitants. When we arrived everything was shut up. The town was in complete darkness practically nobody on the streets. Went to the Venus refinery where we had arranged to be quartered. Even with the help of the refinery management we failed to convince any of the local inn keepers to open up and serve us with a meal.

During the night there was quite a lot of shooting going on in the vicinity of our quarters. In the morning there were about 50 charts outside the refinery gates waiting to purchase kerosene. They had come from as far north as Botosani. Some had already waited for 3 days. On account of the shortage of kerosene not more than 400 litres was sold to anyone customer.

2nd Day

Went to Focsani. On the way spoke to mayor of the Village of Plainesti. Received a very cordial welcome. Told us that the peasants were terrorized by the Russians. The village being on the main road, a great amount of looting had taking place. Upon arrival on Focsani met the Mayor (prof. Lozinski) and the local „prefect” (prof. Boos). Both are member of the national peasant party. We were given a very cordial welcome. The following were among the people we met in Focsani: two of the largest landowners (messes Pana and Zamfirescu), the head of the local Chamber of agriculture (engineer Stancu a procomunist), the local secretary general of the National peasant party (prof. Apostol), the assistant mayor (mr. Mihaileanu a shoemaker and communist), the chief of Police (mr. Tuta) etc.

Focsani was the capital of the county of Putna, has a population of 32.481 (1930).

Focsani by day looks busy, shops seem to be well supplied. A lot of Russians in town.

Focsani by night: Completely dead. Nobody out after 7 p.m. All shutters drawn after dusk. A few Russians in the streets, occasional shooting.

Political situation

The county of Putna is the first county we came to which is part of Moldavia. The mayor, town council etc have hold office since the *coup d'etat* of August 23rd. The communists, very few in numbers in the county of Putna, have not attempted to seize power by force, as they have done in other parts of Moldavia. In normal times Putna comes under the jurisdiction of Galatz. As the communists have seized control there, the Putna authorities asked Bucharest whether they should in future report to and accept orders from Galatz, or from the Minister of Interior in Bucharest. The answer they received was very evasive. The actual position at the time of our visit was that Putna only accepted and carried out orders from Galatz when these were in line with the general policy of the National peasant and the Liberal parties. They also

maintained close contact with Bucharest and abided by their instructions. It is important to note that Bucharest has no authority at the present time in any of the counties north and east of Putna.

We found that the local authorities were quite out of touch with recent happenings in Bucharest and elsewhere. All radios have been confiscated and papers only arrive twice a week. There are only two trains a week to Bucharest. The railway journey to Bucharest used to take about four hours in normal times. Now it takes nearly two days. There are no lights in the trains at nights and a number of passengers are regularly robbed during every journey by organized bands. (Russians and Romanians).

3rd Day

Started off for Bacau but had to give up after travelling some 14 kms north. Passed through the village of Faurei on the main Marasesti - Focsani road. We found that the whole village (some 100 houses) was completely deserted, the inhabitants having fled to the mountains after their homes had been completely pillaged by the Russians.

General impressions of what we saw and heard

Food in Moldavia is in plentiful supply. It cannot be distributed on account of the complete lack of transport facilities e.g. there is an abundance of potatoes in the county of Roman which cannot be moved.

Moldavia is very short of kerosene, sugar, tobacco, matches, salt and (in the plains) firewood.

Fantastic prices are charged for transport, e.g. the price of kerosene in R. Sarat is 24 lei per kg. The transport to Botosani for instance, costs 150 lei per kg. The product is sold in Botosani for 400 lei per kg. A 4 ton lorry charges 1.000.000 lei for the return journey (loaded both ways) Bucharest – Botosani. 25.000 lei is the cost per passenger for a journey in a very crowded bus Botosani to Bucharest.

There are a lot of Russians in Putna – among these are troops guarding the German and Hungarian prisoners in the Focsani P.O.W. camp, convalescent troops from the Focsani hospitals etc. there are also said to be a lot of stragglers in the district. All these and more especially the stragglers, terrorise the population.

The villages situated along the main roads (Bacau to Focsani, Vaslui to Focsani) and along the main railway line running from the north have suffered very badly from pillage. Troop trains often pull up in wayside stations for several hours at a time. The soldiers detrain, and descend upon the nearest village, collect everything they can lay their hands and terrorise the inhabitants. Although we only saw one evacuated village, we were told that there were many others. We were told that a belt about 10 km wide on each side of the main road is considered more or less uninhabitable (We were not able to check this).

The assistant Mayor of the village of Ivancești (Dumitru Nesu) was shot dead by two Russians soldiers. He had been ordered to produce some hens and was actually in that act of catching one when he was shot.

We were very much astonished by number of horse drawn vehicles laden with wine barrels along the road from Focsani to Bucharest. There were many hundreds of these. It is difficult to believe all these stories about lack of horse transport when so many carts seem to be available for the transport of such non essentials.

Russian discipline

In the restaurant in Focsani where we were lunching a Russian lieutenant, slightly under the weather, started to sing. The Russian Major Stukov who accompanied us told him to keep quiet. The lieutenant then came to our table, starts arguing and refused to sit down again when ordered to do so by the Major. The town Mayor (prof. Lozinski) was sitting at our table and I think the Russian lieutenant asked our Major why he was sitting at the same table as the Mayor, to which the major replied that prof. Lozinski was a communist. (This in fact was not true). Eventually the lieutenant retired only to come back again in a few minutes to resume the argument, and to refuse to sit down when ordered to do so. He eventually left the restaurant.

The locals told us that the NKVD are „top dogs” in the district. The mayor once saw two NKVD men remove a colonel by force from a restaurant. It is a common sight to see NKVD men apprehending officers.

The „prefect” (dr. Boos) told us that he had been called to a neighbouring village after a Russian major had raped a girl aged five. He told us that he had personally seen the mother and the victim. The case was reported to the Russian H.Q. but no action was taken. Prof. Apostol also saw the child.

The chief of Police told us that so far, 5 of his policemen had been killed by Russians in Focsani.

Epidemics in the county of Putna

In answer to our inquiry the local M.O. informed us that there were two cases of Typhus in Focșani, and 24 cases in the county of Putna.

The following information was obtained from:

Mr. Pana, the owner of about 500 acres of land in the county of Putna.

The following items were removed from his property without any receipt being given:

30 wagons of wheat

6 wagons of peas

1 wagons of maize

4 wagons of oats

12 wagons of wine

40 racehorses – including the stallion Lord Pentourist

40 oxen

50 cows and heifers

100 pigs

2.000 hens, geese, turkeys and etc.

500 sheep

10 carriages and harness

20 farm carts.

Threshing machines and other equipment.

Pana estimates the value of the above at 100 million lei.

Mr. Pana has sown only 50 hectares of autumn wheat (in normal times 150 hectares).

The land has not been worked by anybody else. The peasants have not taken possession of the property.

Mr. Zamfirescu the owner of about 700 acres.

The following items were removed from his property without any formal receipt.

70 pigs

20 oxen

All his farm implements

6 wagons of wheat

5 wagons of oats

30 wagons of wine

4 horses and two carriages

1 motor car

All personal belongings etc.

Mr. Zamfirescu has not sown anything this autumn. He showed us a certificate issued by the local chamber of agriculture stating that he was unable to work the land himself due the lack of seed, cattles, ploughs etc. The certificate further states that Mr. Zamfirescu was unable to find any peasants in the neighbourhood willing to work his land on a 50/50 basis.

No doubt, Lt. col. Wheeler will make a separate report on the Agricultural situation.

E.C. Masterson, Lt. col., Economic Section”

Of course, such a report is well worth a succinct analysis. In the first place, it should be noted that within the Allied Control Commission in Romania the factor of decision was the USSR. As we have seen, the mission of the two British officers, Masterson and Wheeler, was practically “supervised” by a Soviet military with the rank of Major.

Of the realities recorded in this report we can only appreciate their veracity, as they are confirmed - as a line of conduct to the level of an overview – by numerous other archive documents. Interesting is the fact that the mission of Masterson has failed in practice because it failed to reach even Bacau, so nothing about a visit to Iasi or Suceava.

Nevertheless, the recorded during the three days of experience in Moldavia are proof of a professional on the matter⁷. An officer was charged with the exact realities in Romania three months after the date on which it had become allied of Soviet Union.

Although the situation was virtually uncontrollable from Bucharest, we must emphasize the desperate effort of Prime Minister from that date, General Nicolae Rădescu, to repair the situation. In particular, he has set up an interministerial commission which, on 25th of December 1944, has proposed the first concrete measures for Moldavia to return to normality⁸. Certainly that, in conditions of communists and their allies' boycott, which benefited the soviet protection, the actions proposed by General Rădescu had no effect.

⁷ Colonel Ted Masterson was experienced with regard to the issues of Romania; this is because his previous mission was in Turkey, where he has been in contact with Alexandru Cretzeanu. Cretzeanu had been accredited in Turkey by Mihai Antonescu, but will act on behalf of Iuliu Maniu and of the democratic opposition. Accredited in Ankara on 15th of September 1943, Cretzeanu will be informed by the British, on 9th of November 1943 that negotiations for the output of war must be carried with all three nations' allies. On the 1st of February 1944, Cretzeanu met the colonel Ted Masterson, who worked on the Middle East and it has informed that Allies were ready to receive an envoy of Romanian opposition, empowered to sign unconditional surrender – See, at length, the memoirs of Alexander Cretzeanu, *The lost opportunity*, Iași, 1998, pp. 28, and 135-140.

⁸ See, at length, Dumitru Șandru, *Stabilirea administrației comuniste în Moldova* [The establishment of communist administration in Moldova], in *6 martie 1945. Începutul comunizării României* [6 March 1945. The beginnings of communization of Romania], Bucharest, 1995, pp. 59-77.