

**THE END OF THE SLOVAK ARMY EPIC ON THE EASTERN FRONT  
AND THE CHANGE OF THE ROMANIAN STRATEGY  
TOWARDS BRATISLAVA**

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**Abstract.** *This analysis considers the way in which Romania managed the more and more complex relations within the Axis during the year 1943. At the beginning of the year, the military situation on the Eastern front had changed substantially. Germany's defeat at Stalingrad had changed the relation between Germany and its allies. The tension between Germany and Romania, on the one hand, and between Slovakia and Hungary on the other hand, would also mark the relations within the Axis. However, the armies of the three allies continued to support the German war effort. The Slovak Rapid Division participated during the year in the military defensive operations of the Crimean Peninsula. Its effort led to the erosion of the combat capabilities, especially after the disaster caused by the Battle of Kakhovka. Instead, the Slovakian army had to face an unprecedented number of defections. The Slovak soldiers moving to the enemy had forced the Germans to disband the Rapid Division, some of which being sent to the Italian front and the other to the labour force. Nevertheless, Romanian-Slovak relations continued to be good. The change in the Romanian strategy having as its main objective to restore the Transylvania's border, will force Bucharest to maintain the best possible relations with Slovakia.*

**Keywords:** *Slovak army, Rapid Division, Crimean Peninsula, Eastern Front, deserters*

**Rezumat:** *Sfârșitul epopeii armatei slovace pe Frontul de Est și schimbarea strategiei românești față de Bratislava. Analiza de față are în vedere modul cum a gestionat România raporturile tot mai complexe din cadrul Axei pe parcursul anului 1943. La începutul anului situația militară de pe frontul de est se modificase substanțial. Înfrângerea de la Stalingrad a reasezat raporturile dintre Germania și aliații săi. Tensiunea care s-a instalat între Germania pe de o parte și România, Slovacia și Ungaria pe de alta avea să marcheze relațiile din cadrul Axei. Cu toate acestea, armatele celor trei aliați au continuat să sprijine efortul de război german. Divizia Rapidă slovacă a participat pe parcursul anului la operațiunile militare de apărare a Peninsulei Crimeea. Efortul ei a dus la erodarea capacității de luptă, mai ales după dezastrul din bătălia de la Kachovka. În schimb, armata slovacă s-a confruntat cu un număr fără precedent de dezertări. Trecerile soldaților slovaci*

la inamic i-a obligat pe germani să desființeze Divizia rapidă, o parte fiind strămutată pe frontul italian iar alta trecută în cadrul unităților de muncă. Cu toate acestea relațiile româno-slovace au continuat să fie bune. Schimbarea strategiei românești care și-a impus ca principal obiectiv în refacerea frontierei din Transilvania, forța Bucureștiul să păstreze relații cât mai bune cu Slovacia.

**Résumé : La fin de l'épopée de l'armée slovaque sur le Front d'Est et le changement de la stratégie roumaine envers Bratislava.** L'analyse ci-jointe fait référence à la manière dans laquelle la Roumanie géra les rapports de plus en plus complexes du cadre de l'Axe le long de l'année 1943. Au début de l'année la situation militaire du front d'est se modifia de manière substantielle. La défaite de Stalingrad rétablit les rapports entre l'Allemagne et ses alliés. La tension qui s'installa entre l'Allemagne d'une part et la Roumanie, la Slovaquie et la Hongrie de l'autre marquera les relations à l'intérieur de l'Axe. Malgré cela, les armées des trois alliés continuèrent à appuyer l'effort de guerre allemand. La Division Rapide slovaque participa le long de l'année aux opérations militaires de défense de la Péninsule Crimée. Son effort mena à l'érosion de la capacité de lutte, surtout après le désastre de la bataille de Kachovka. En échange, l'armée slovaque se confronta avec un numéro sans précédent de désertions. Les passages des soldats slovaques à l'ennemi obligèrent les Allemands à détruire la Division rapide, on déménagea une partie sur le front italien, pendant qu'on passa une autre dans le cadre des unités de travail. Malgré cela, les relations roumano-slovaques continuèrent à être bonnes. Le changement de la stratégie roumaine qui s'imposa comme objectif principal refaire la frontière de la Transylvanie, obligea Bucarest à garder les meilleures relations avec la Slovaquie.

## INTRODUCTION

The epic of the Slovak army on the Eastern Front was extensively dealt with in Czech and Slovak historiography. In contrast, in Romanian historiography, cooperation on the military realm between Romania and Slovakia during the war years was only partially studied. Moreover, the way the dissolution of the Slovakian small army was received and how this was reflected in the bilateral relations was not surprised by any analysis. The present study focuses on the complex relationship between the Axis satellites and the Nazi Reich and on how the Romanian-Slovak cooperation was influenced by this relationship<sup>1</sup>. The two countries

<sup>1</sup> See our previous studies: *La participation de l'armée slovaque a la campagne contre l'Union Soviétique en 1941. Perceptions roumaines*, in "Codrul Cosminului", XX, no. 1, 2016; respectively *Relations militaires roumaines-slovaques en 1942*, in "Codrul Cosminului", XXII, no.2, 2016.

had contacts in various forms, without a real Romanian-Slovak but cooperation in the military field. Despite the unfavourable situation on the front, relations between politicians and Romanian and Slovak militaries have been constant. At the same time, we considered the situation of Romania and Slovakia during 1943 and from the perspective of the relations between the two allied states of the Nazi Reich. Since 1943, for Romania, military participation against the Soviet Union has gained new connotations. Under the conditions of defeat in front of the Red Army, the main objective, that of rebuilding the frontiers of Great Romania, has articulated and was viewed more nuanced. The reconstruction of the Eastern border of Romania began to be regarded with caution. With the defeats in Russia, the cancellation of the consequences of the Vienna agreement of 1940 became the main objective. As for Slovakia, since the border issue with Hungary was the only objective, the cooperation between the two became tighter. Both countries hoped that at the end of the war they would be able to rebuild the lost frontiers of the Vienna accords, or at least to preserve the existing ones in the face of the Hungarian threat. The same realities forced Hungary to look for solutions in the new context. Hungary's military cooperation aimed to preserve borders or even increase them on the part of Romania and Slovakia. At the same time, the three were aware that a possible victory against the Soviet Union would not solve the territorial dispute between them. That is why everybody tried not to exhaust their military potential and economic capabilities in the confrontation of the East. Romania and Slovakia were in a favourable position because they could always fight against the common opponent represented by Hungary at any time. This was well known in Budapest, which had only one advantage: the influence in Berlin. But the general situation of the Reich has rapidly deteriorated what has affected the general relations in the Tripartite Pact.

Along with some general considerations issued by the American historian Larry Watts, but without considering Slovakia, data on the situation of the Romanian-Slovak-Hungarian relations in 1943 can be found in the studies of the Romanian historians Petre Otu or Nicolae Ciachir<sup>2</sup>. In her turn, Slovak researcher Jana Bauerová partially touched some details of the collaboration between Bratislava

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<sup>2</sup> Petre Otu, *Relații militare româno-slovace (1940-1944)* [Romanian-Slovak Military Relations (1940-1944)], in Constantin Hlihor (coord.), *Structuri politice în secolul XX*, [Political Structures in the 20th Century], București, Editura Curtea Veche, 2000; Nicolae Ciachir, *Relații româno-slovace și româno-croate între 1941-1944*, [Romanian-Slovak relations and Romanian-Croat relations between 1941-1944], in "Revista de Istorie Militară", 1(41), 1997.

and Bucharest in 1943<sup>3</sup>. Instead, the documents edited by Alesandru Duțu and his collaborators captured the Romanian-Slovak relations during 1943<sup>4</sup>. Corroborated with information from the diplomatic environments and preserved in the Romanian archives, they complete the overall picture of an aspect of Romanian's well-unknown history.

### ROMANIANS, SLOVAKS AND HUNGARIANS ON THE EASTERN FRONT. GERMAN PERCEPTIONS

The year 1943 began under the auspices of the great German defeat at Stalingrad. Reich leaders were not able to assume the blame for disaster and tried to accredit the idea of betrayal. The German Army Staff blamed its allies for failure in Stalingrad. "About hundreds of thousands of Allies - Romanians, Hungarians, Italians and Slovaks - as well as the countless Hilfswillige (Russian auxiliaries), no one spoke to the Führer Headquarters. And if, however, they were mentioned, it was only to bring false accusations and reproaches about their alleged shameful shame before the enemy"<sup>5</sup>. Not all German military leaders agreed that the Allies were guilty of the Stalingrad disaster. Colonel Hans Doerr, commander of the German liaison detachment with the 4th Romanian Army, considered that the Romanian soldiers "fought bravely". In turn, field Marshal Gerd von Runstedt said the Slovaks were "excellent, very modest" admitting that they were badly equipped and unprepared for the battlefield on the eastern front. Instead, the Hungarians "only wanted to go home sooner"<sup>6</sup>. Another German officer, Colonel Wilhelm Adam, made a comparison of Germany's allies on the eastern front. He doubted the Italians' ability to cope with the weight of being 3000 km away on the front. He also had doubts about the Romanians or the Hungarians, but he believed

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<sup>3</sup> Jana Bauerová, *Slovensko a Rumunsko v rokoch 1939-1944*, [Slovakia and Romania between 1939-1944], Filozofická Fakulta Trnavskej Univerzity v Trnave, 2014.

<sup>4</sup> Alesandru Duțu, Lenuța Nicolescu, Alexandru Oșca, Andrei Nicolescu, *Atașaii militari transmit* [Military attaches transmit], vol. IV, 1940-1944, București, Editura Europa Nova, 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, *Alături de Wehrmacht. "Cruciada împotriva bolșevismului". Aliți, voluntari, auxiliari 1941-1945*, [Alongside the Wehrmacht. "A Crusade against Bolshevism". Allies, voluntaries, auxiliaries 1941-1945], translated by Cristina Crâmpîță, București, Editura Militară, 2015, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> Constantin Corneanu, *Sub povara marilor decizii. România și Geopolitica Marilor Puteri (1941-1945)* [Under the burden of big decisions. Romania and Great Powers Geopolitics (1941-1945)], 2nd edition, Târgoviște, Editura Cetatea de Scaun, 2013, note 346, p. 371.

that they had a good moral, despite their weak endowment. According to his testimony, "Paulus valued the Romanians a lot" but "he also trusted the Hungarians"<sup>7</sup>. The German officer did not criticize allied armies even after the Stalingrad disaster. He considered the diminished morale of the Romanian or Hungarian troops a result of the weak endowment and especially the lack of motivation to fight on such a terrain. He mentioned that the Romanians had fought very well in 1941 when they had a clear objective but that beyond the Don and the morale of the German soldiers had fallen. "What do we look for in the Volga, Colonel?" Was the question that it would also smash Adam<sup>8</sup>.

Relations between the Axis partners have become more and more tense with unfavourable military operations. Germany noted that the rivalry of Romanians and Slovaks with the Hungarians could even lead to a military conflict. On January 9, 1943, Marshal Ion Antonescu submitted a Memoir to Adolf Hitler. Along with the serious military problems due to the imminent defeat at Stalingrad, Antonescu touched on the Hungarian problem. He noted in the Memorial some statements in the Budapest Parliament regarding Transylvania. He cited, among other things, Minister Ulllein Retvitzsky, Hungarian media director, who said to a close friend that "Hungary's preoccupation is to win the war when it would be willing to lose the Slovakian and Yugoslav territories if it would be offset in the territory of Romania". Other Hungarian deputies thought that Hungary should recover all lost territories from Transylvania to the Tatra Mountains.<sup>9</sup>The German attaché to the Romanian Army High Command reported that "on the basis of the old enmity of death promoted to the present day by Romanian propaganda, Hungary is perceived as an enemy. Even in the Romanian units fighting in the east, chauvinist elements within the officers' body present Hungary as the main enemy, suggesting that the purpose of the Romanians' struggle in the Eastern campaign would be the recovery of the broken parts of the country - as a kind of appreciation for the Romanian help"<sup>10</sup>. It is true that at the time of his report - March 5, 1943 - in Romania, the idea that Germany had lost the war in the East and that the country had to redefine its objectives of war by rebuilding the lost frontiers in 1940

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<sup>7</sup> Wilhem Adam, *O hotărâre dificilă. Autobiografie. Cu aportul științific și literar al prof. dr. doc. Otto Rühle* [A tough decision. Autobiography, With the guidance of prof. dr. doc. Otto Rühle], translated by Costin Feneșan, București, Editura Militară, 1988, p. 68.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibidem*, p.187.

<sup>9</sup> *Antonescu-Hitler. Corespondență și întâlniri inedite (1940-1944)* [Antonescu-Hitler. Correspondence and unique encounters (1940-1944)], 2nd volume, edited by Vasile Arimia, Ion Ardeleanu, Ștefan Lache, București, Editura Cozia, 1991, doc. 52, p. 16-17.

<sup>10</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

became clearer. The old anti-communist propaganda was more obviously replaced by a new campaign of awareness that the war effort was aimed at restoring the border in Transylvania.

The Slovaks were no longer willing to support the military effort. Romania's military attaché to Bratislava, C. Ștefănescu, wrote in January 1943 that Slovakia sends no more than a contingent to Russia, and only if it is armed by the Germans. Moreover, Tiso was worried about the general military evolution and demanded Germany's guarantees of how the new European post-war order would look. He was also anxious about the aggravation of the domestic political situation becoming more and more difficult in the conditions of prolonging the war. For his part, Chief of Staff of the Slovak Army, Ferdinand Čatloš called for the withdrawal of the Rapid Division in Slovakia. A Slovak report on the situation on the front indicated that "it is generally said that Germany will lose the war"<sup>11</sup>. This gesture followed the statements of the Banská Bystrica Conference on January 22-23, 1943, when it was decided to stop supporting the German Military Mission in Slovakia. The Slovaks were also dissatisfied with the efforts made by the Hungarians on the front, having information that they had lost many militaries from the occupied territories, Romanian and Slovak, preferring to keep the Hungarians in reserve<sup>12</sup>. The Slovaks informed the Romanians that the armaments acquired by Hungary in Germany lately, especially tanks, were not sent to the front<sup>13</sup>.

In turn, the relations between the Hungarian and the German military were very tense. The withdrawal of German units in the Hungarian sector created the Hungarian commander Vitéz Gusztáv Jány the impression that he was betrayed. He even intended at one point to leave the front with the entire army. But the German pressures were so great that the Hungarians remained on the front. In January 1943, the Red Army launched a large military operation in the Voronezh sector, hitting the Hungarian troops across the entire stretch of the front sector. Three days later, the Hungarian and Italian troops were crushed and retreated. The withdrawal order came only on January 26, when much of the Hungarian Army was defeated and decimated. It lost 100,000 troops and the whole arsenal. Though the Romanian troops were losing even more, Hungary could not cope with this war. It was the first time the Budapest authorities understood that the war in

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<sup>11</sup> James Mace Ward, *Priest, Politician, Collaborator. Josef Tiso and the Making of Fascist Slovakia*, Ithaca, London, Cornell University Press, 2013, p. 236.

<sup>12</sup> Alesandru Duțu, et al. *op. cit.*, doc. 40, p. 186-188.

<sup>13</sup> Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (hereinafter A.M.A.E.), Fond 71, Slovacia, vol. 13, f. 197.

the East was lost and they posed the question of a diplomatic solution to the conflict. After the Voronezh disaster, the Hungarian troops were no longer able to fight, providing only occupation sectors on the territory of Ukraine. Even if they had suffered losses in the fighting with the Partisans and Horthy wanted to pull them off the front. Hitler had lost confidence in Hungary's ability to contribute to the war but had no intention of saving it<sup>14</sup>. As the German army was very weak and incapable to keep up with the Soviet offensive, any ally was welcome. The Führer had changed its optics towards smaller allies. He put pressure on Bucharest, Bratislava, and Budapest to ensure continued participation in the war by the three.

Although the German leadership was warned about the altered attitudes of its allies, it avoided making firm commitments. Even in the defeat of Stalingrad, he declined to accurately state what the Axis's geopolitical intentions and goals were. Under these circumstances, small allies have begun to open communication lines with the United Nations through neutral states. Germany's response was to take strong measures to achieve the loyalty of its partners. With pressure, but also benefiting from the advantage of military domination, Berlin brought the Hungarians, Romanians and Slovaks to account. That is why he stopped arms supplies to the three countries and took into account a military step that would lead to their occupation. There was information that these countries did not use military equipment from Germany on the eastern front but were preparing them inside the country for a possible direct confrontation with each other<sup>15</sup>. The Germans changed their tactics and in January-February 1943 Hitler threatened all collaborators who were planning a possible separate peace<sup>16</sup>. In turn, the leaders of the satellite countries were summoned to Germany.

Antonescu was the first to visit Hitler on April 12-13, 1943. The German Chancellor asked Antonescu for explanations of the peace-surveys undertaken by Romania. To stop Hitler's accusations, the Romanian leader accused the Hungarians of contributing to the eastern front with improvised troops, poorly prepared and largely formed of uninstructed Romanians in the Transylvanian territory<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Paul Lendvai, *Ungurii. Timp de un mileniu învingători în înfrângeri* [The Hungarians: A Thousand Years of Victory in Defeat], București, Editura Humanitas, 2001, p. 429.

<sup>15</sup> Generalul Ion Gheorghe, *Un dictator nefericit. Mareșalul Antonescu (Calea României spre Statul satelit)* [Marshal Antonescu, An unhappy dictator (Romania's way to the Satellite State)], edited by Stelian Neagoe, București, Editura Machiavelli, 1996, p. 200.

<sup>16</sup> Róbert Letz, *Slovenské dejiny v 1938-1945* [Slovak History in 1938-1945], Bratislava, Literárne informačné centrum, 2012, p. 165.

<sup>17</sup> Larry L. Watts, *Aliați incompatibili. România, Finlanda, Ungaria și al Treilea Reich*

Antonescu was well informed because the Romanian military attaché in Budapest regularly reported reports showing that after the Voronezh disaster, the Hungarians remained only declarative in the Axis, seeking to diminish their military effort and started secret negotiations with the Allies for the retreat from war<sup>18</sup>.

Two days later, Horthy's turn came. At the Klessheim meeting between Hitler and Horthy on April 16, 1943, the Führer accused Horthy of having the Hungarian troops fought very badly. The Hungarian leader tried to explain that Hungary is obliged to keep part of the army in the country to prevent the restoration of the Little Entente between Croats, Romanians and Slovaks. Together with Ferenc Szombathelyi, he tried to bring the issue of Banat and the revision of the Hungarian border with Romania and Slovakia. But Hitler did not let him present his materials, interrupting him violently, and reproaching him that the military reports prove the Hungarian army's inability to rise to the importance of the situation<sup>19</sup>. The Hungarian diplomatic failure would lead to the loss of Berlin's confidence in Budapest and the final deterioration of the German-Hungarian relations.

On April 23, Monsignor Jozef Tiso was summoned to the Klessheim Headquarters to take into account the need to continue the military effort<sup>20</sup>. The Slovak leader was convinced to continue the war effort in the hope that Hitler would recognize his merits and support it against Hungary. Tiso complained of Hungarian irrational propaganda but promised that Slovakia would continue the fight<sup>21</sup>. While preserving his confidence in the Slovak leader, Hitler turned to a classical stratagem: he decorated it in 1943 with the Golden Cross of the German Order. Moreover, Hitler promised him to re-establish the military potential of the Slovak army<sup>22</sup>. Obviously, Hitler assured Tiso that he would give him all the support and told him that "With the exception of Mussolini, no other ally caused less trouble than Slovakia"<sup>23</sup>.

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[Incompatible allies. Romania, Finland, Hungary and the 3rd Reich], București, Editura RAO, 2012, p. 229.

<sup>18</sup> Cezar Măță, *Serviciile secrete ale României în războiul mondial (1939-1945)* [Romania's Secret services during the Second World War (1939-1945)], Iași, Casa Editorială *Demiurg*, 2010, Anex 23, p. 332-333.

<sup>19</sup> Larry L. Watts, *op. cit.*, p. 225; James Mace Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>20</sup> Milan S. Đurica, *Jozef Tiso 1887-1947. Životopisný profil* [Jozef Tiso 1887-1947, Biographical profile], Bratislava, Lúč, 2014, p. 379.

<sup>21</sup> James Mace Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 238.

<sup>22</sup> Anton Spiesz, Dusan Caplovic, *Illustrated Slovak History. A Struggle for Sovereignty in Central Europe*, Wauconda, Illinois, Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2006, p. 211.

<sup>23</sup> Livia Rotkirchen, *A Few Considerations on the Historiography of the Holocaust*, in *The*



These visits of enemy leaders were meant to break their collaboration in various fields. The rivalry between them was for Germany a situation which they explored as much as possible. Neither Horthy knew what Hitler had promised Antonescu's or Tiso's, nor did they know what the Fuhrer had promised to the Hungarians. That's why they were willing to compromise. Instead, in August, the Slovenian president said that if Italy exited the war, he would follow the actions of Romania and Hungary. His fairly elusive speech made it clear that they might distance themselves from German politics. But its condition for a possible new orientation was to preserve the country's independence. In October, Tiso reiterated his unconditional loyalty to the Reich<sup>24</sup>.

The three countries continued fighting alongside the Reich, but their adversity did not diminish. In the new strategy, everyone has sought to find new solutions to achieve their goals. In the September 1943 bulletin, the Romanian military diplomat in Bratislava said that Hungary's decision to exit the war caused her to liquidate her conflict with her neighbours by granting tolerance to the Romanian or Slovak minority on its territory. The Hungarians tried to "close their eyes to the anti-Hungarian demonstrations that occur every now and then in Slovakia", hoping they will be able to reconcile with Bratislava<sup>25</sup>. Their gesture was supposed to be a signal in Bucharest to normalize relations. But the General Staff was considering keeping a troop reserve on the national territory that would ensure territorial integrity if attacked by its neighbours. The refusal to send troops to the front was also motivated by negotiations with the Allies and wanted to be a sign of his good faith<sup>26</sup>. In a discussion with Hans Ludin, the German Minister in Bratislava in July 1943, the Romanian military attaché drew his attention to the importance of Transylvania for Romania's policy. The German has refrained from commenting on the Hungarian-Romanian relations but said that "Romania has had the greatest losses among all our allies and knows that it has a large army in Russia, while other allies would like to make the war without loss, sitting the home". Asked who he was referring to, the German diplomat responded elusively: "My comrades who fought with the Slovaks told me that the Slovak army had fought well"<sup>27</sup>. The Hungarian army was considered to be worse. Most of the military came from among

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*Tragedy of the Jews of Slovakia. 1938-1945: Slovakia and the "Final Solution of the Jewish Question"*, Oświęcim-Banská Bystrica, 2002, p. 80.

<sup>24</sup> Milan S. Ďurica, *op. cit.*, p. 387.

<sup>25</sup> Cezar Măță, *op. cit.*, p. 336.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 334-335.

<sup>27</sup> Alesandru Duțu, et al. *op. cit.*, doc. 45, p. 211.

the minorities, which aroused the mistrust of the officers. The presence of Romanians and Slovaks in these units has further strained relations with Romania and Slovakia. The Hungarians, however, continued to motivate the danger inside as they tried to withdraw their troops from the front<sup>28</sup>.

In spite of official statements, Romanians, Slovaks and Hungarians have knitted through various channels their contacts with neutral countries or Axis opponents. But Germany's allies' goals did not have much of an echo in Washington and London. Only Romania still had military and economic capabilities that would have been attractive to Western allies. Instead, Slovakia had not been recognized by them, and Hungary was accused of supporting Germany's pre-war policy. The Hungarians and the Slovaks sought to persuade Westerners that the refusal to support Germany in its military effort was an important argument. But for Hungary alone, leaving the alliance with Germany could be an asset at the next peace conference. Given the existence of an exiled Czechoslovakian government recognized by the Allies, for Slovakia the defeat of Germany represented the end of independence. In turn, Romania was in a complicated situation. The secret negotiations that began in 1943 aimed at rebuilding the border of Transylvania. But the alliance of the three with Germany blocked such initiatives.

### THE SLOVAK'S ARMY DISSOLUTION

The German command had in the spring of 1943, 232 divisions on the Eastern Front, of which 196 were German and the rest of belonged to the allies and auxiliaries. Among these, Romania had the largest forces, estimated at nine divisions from the five Hungarians and the two Slovaks<sup>29</sup>. The latter would lose their first motivation to fight, and the Slovak military forces on the Eastern Front entered into dissolution in 1943.

The Slovak army experienced the shock of winter 1942-1943. The Slovak Army Corps fought in 1942 within the South Army Group, subordinated to the Army Group "A" acting on the direction of the Caucasus Mountains, alongside a 1st Corps of the 3rd Romanian Army<sup>30</sup>. Once the Stalingrad disaster was profiled, the

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<sup>28</sup> Cristian Troncotă, *Glorie și tragedii. Momente din istoria Serviciilor de informații și contrainformații române pe Frontul de Est (1941-1944)* [Glory and tragedies. Moments of the History of the Romanian Intelligence and Counterintelligence Services on the Eastern Front (1941-1944)], București, Editura Nemira, 2003, p.160.

<sup>29</sup> Vladimir Zodian, *Armatele româno-germane pe frontul din Răsărit* [Romanian and German Armies on the Eastern Front], Bacău, Editura Vicovia, 2014, note 120, p. 181.

<sup>30</sup> Pavel Mičianik, *Vojnoví zajatci slovenskej armády na východnom fronte 1941-1943*

Rapid Division was seized with all the artillery material for recovery. From January 8, 1943, the Slovak Rapid Division was subordinated to the Armed Forces Group by Angelis, along with four German divisions and the 6th and 9th Romanian Divisions. The Rapid Slovak Division received a withdrawal order commenced on January 23, 1943, to Crimea, where it was involved in fighting for the defence of the sea. Slovak military leaders hoped to re-establish the Division with a staff of 12-13,000 soldiers. It was the beginning of the year at Perekop, and the reorganization was to be taken on the west coast of the Crimean Peninsula, between Sevastopol and the Evpatoria. Without receiving significant reinforcements and low morale, the Slovak troops continued to fight alongside the Wehrmacht. In March 1943, 5,000 soldiers with the Rapid Division led by Pavel Kuna were ordered to defend a 250 km shoreline, being involved only in struggles against the Soviet partisans in the Crimea<sup>31</sup>. At the same time, Slovak aviation was rebuilt with German support. In Crimea there used to be an aviation school for bombing that prepared the Slovak pilots. The Germans expressed favourably to the performances of the Slovak pilots and appreciated their work. Along with German and Romanian comrades, Slovak pilots participated in the battles of the Novorossiysk area in April 1943<sup>32</sup>. It was the first time that Romanian and Slovak soldiers fought side by side.

After the withdrawal of the Slovak army and the reorganization of its combat units, in July 1943, the only remaining Slovakian structure was the Rapid Division. Ferdinand Čatloš repeatedly tried to withdraw this unit too, in Slovakia, but the Germans opposed. Under these conditions, the Slovak Army leaders organized visits of the military attachés accredited to Bratislava to the Slovakian regiments on the front to raise their morale. In August 1943, Slovak troops were sent to the west of the peninsula to build fortifications to prevent the Red Army from entering the interior. The division was reorganized and divided into 1st Infantry

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[Slovak soldiers seized on the Eastern front], in Peter Sokolovič (coord.), *Od Salzburgu do vypuknutia Povstania. Slovenská republika 1939-1945 očami mladých historikov VIII* [From Salzburg to the outbreak of insurrection. Slovak Republic seen by young historians], Bratislava, Ustav Pamäti Národa, 2009, p. 365.

<sup>31</sup> František Cséfalvay, Lubica Kázmerová, *Slovenská republika 1939-1945. Chronologia najdôležitejších udalostí* [Slovak Republic. The cronology of the main events], Bratislava, Historický ústav SAV, 2007, p. 95.

<sup>32</sup> General Platon Chirnoagă, *Istoria politică și militară a războiului României contra Rusiei Sovietice 22 iunie 1941-23 august 1944* [Political and Military History of the War of Romania against Soviet Russia June 22, 1941-August 23, 1944], 3rd Edition, Iași, Editura Fides, 1997, p. 180.

Division, respectively II Infantry Division<sup>33</sup>. Division I was sent to the isthmus Perekop area and the other was placed at Kahovka in front of the Soviet army, and on 27 October received the order to occupy defensive positions on the Askanija Nova – Dmitrijevska line (west of Melitopol). Here was the largest military catastrophe in Slovakia on the eastern front, the division being destroyed by the Soviets in one day in what was called the “Stalingrad of the Slovaks”. Without the full squad, the Slovaks were strongly attacked by Soviet troops of tanks and cavalry decimating them. More than 2200 Slovak soldiers were taken out of the battle, the rest retreating in dandy over the Dnieper. The only exception was the II / 11 artillery detachment that resisted until November 7, alongside German troops in the Kachovka area<sup>34</sup>.

After this disaster, the 1st Division of the Slovak Republic was sent to strengthen the defensive lines south on Nikolaev. At the beginning of 1944, part of the Division was reformed and sent to secure the lines of the Crimean Peninsula. Between April 20 and May 3, 1944, the last 700 Slovak soldiers were evacuated from the Crimea, along with Germans, Romanians, or other allies<sup>35</sup>. The remainder of the Slovak units were reorganized under the name “Tatarko Battle group”<sup>36</sup>, assuring the backs of the South Army Group lines. Subsequently, they retreated to the Black Sea coast, west of the Dnieper until confluence with the Bug, receiving tasks for the defence of communications lines and railways<sup>37</sup>. Around 5000 Slovak soldiers led by Colonel Karol Peknik, billeted in southern Ukraine, were withdrawn in the second half of February 1944 to the west, reaching the territory of Romania<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Ján Stanislav, *Ferdinand Čatlos v perimetri kolaborácie a odboja* [Ferdinand Catlos in the space of collaboration and resistance], in Marek Syrný (coord.), *Kolaborácia a odbojní Slováci a v krajinách nemeckej sféry vplyvu v rokoch 1939-1945* [Collaboration and resistance in Slovakia and territories under German influence], Banská Bystrica, Muzeum Slovenského Národného Povstania, 2009, p. 330.

<sup>34</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>35</sup> General Platon Chirnoagă, *op. cit.*, p. 196.

<sup>36</sup> He became chief of staff of the Slovak Army, Petre Otu, *op. cit.*, p. 378.

<sup>37</sup> Josef Bystrický, *Evoluția pe frontul din România anul 1944 în relație cu Slovacia* [Evolution on the Romanian Front of 1944 in relation to Slovakia], in *Evenimentele de la 23 august 1944 din România și Insurecția națională slovacă din 29 august 1944. Consecințele lor asupra eliberării României și Slovaciei și a sfârșitului celui de al doilea război mondial* [The events of August 23, 1944 in Romania and the Slovak National Insurrection of August 29, 1944. Their Consequences on the Liberation of Romania and Slovakia and the End of the Second World War], Banská Bystrica – Alba Iulia, Academia Română, Academia Slovacă de Științe, 2012, p. 76.

<sup>38</sup> Rolf-Dieter Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

One of the problems faced by the Slovak army was the large number of desertions, especially after the military turn from Stalingrad. Slovak soldiers have been confronted with big problems regarding food supplies, illness and malnutrition. According to historian Rolf-Dieter Müller, “these poor soldiers, poorly commanded in the campaign, have gone through a lot of trouble without finding an understanding from the German allies”<sup>39</sup>. The first major default in the Slovak army occurred during the Battle of Stalingrad<sup>40</sup>. Commander of the Rapid Division, the elite force of the Slovak army, General Štefan Jurech, together with a group of officers, came in contact with the Red Army to teach. On behalf of his commander, Lieutenant Major Gustáv Donoval signed with the Soviet Colonels Dolganov and Jemeljanov, on January 22, 1943, an understanding of how the transfer to the enemy was to be organized. But the general withdrawal order of the entire army to which the Division was subordinated, prevented this desertion<sup>41</sup>.

This change of disposition was also due to the First Czechoslovak Brigade of the Red Army. In January 1942, the first battalion of Slovak soldiers’ prisoners to the enemy was created in the USSR, at Buzuluk, on the Samara River. Led by Lieutenant Colonel Ludvik Svoboda, it entered the battle in March 1943 in the battle of Sokolovo, south of Kharkov. In April, 124 officers and soldiers from the Rapid Division, Sukhumi prisoners, asked Stalin for approval to join the Czechoslovak Brigade<sup>42</sup>. A second unit, made up of Slovaks, entered the battle against the Axis troops in May<sup>43</sup>. In the same month, Colonel Ludvik Svoboda, the commander of

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<sup>39</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 103.

<sup>40</sup> The first known defect in the Slovak army was that of Lieutenant Anton Hirner since the Battle of Lipovec, in July 1941. Along with several members of a mobile brigade, he was taken prisoner of the Soviet soldiers. Marxist historiography tried to accredit the idea that the Slovak army did not trust the victory against the Soviet Union, and that mass desertions are a response to this mistrust. In fact, Anton Hirner’s example cannot be given as the moment of the beginning of the desertions. The loss of confidence in the victory of the Wehrmacht took place gradually and became apparent only after the Battle of Stalingrad. See: Martin Lacko, *Pripad poručika Antona Hirnera a spol. (O jednom mýte slovenskej vojenskej historiografie)* [The case of Lieutenant Anton Hirner and collaborators (About one myth of Slovak military historiography)], in Michal Šmigel, Peter Mičko (Eds.), *Slovenská Republika 1939-1945 očami mladých historikov IV*, [Slovak Republic 1939-1945, seen by young historians], IV, Banská Bystrica, 2005, pp. 238-248.

<sup>41</sup> Josef Bystrický, *op. cit.*, p. 75-76.

<sup>42</sup> František Cséfalvay, Ľubica Kázmerová, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

<sup>43</sup> *Rezistența europeană în anii celui de al doilea război mondial 1938-1945*, vol. I, *Țările din Europa Centrală și de Sud-Est* [European resistance in the years of the Second World

the Czechoslovak forces fighting on the eastern front, was decorated with the Lenin Order by Mihail Kalinin in person. On this occasion, he declared that "Czechoslovakia will remain faithful forever to the union of the Slavic peoples"<sup>44</sup>. The Czechoslovak I Brigade, out of which 10% formed the Slovaks, also distinguished itself in the struggles for the release of Kiev in autumn<sup>45</sup>. On 30 October 1943 north of Melitopol, 2750 soldiers and 500 officers deserted. Since then, the Germans have lost confidence in the Slovak army and their units have been interposed between the German ones, being strictly supervised<sup>46</sup>.

The other Slovak military unit deployed on the front was the Security Division which in 1942 had operated behind the lines in the Minsk region. A part of the Slovak troops stationed in Minsk were withdrawn, and instead on them, Hungarian troops were brought to defend Zhitomir-Kiev line. And within the Slovakian units in the Minsk region there have been large percentages of desertions. Here, Slovak soldiers passed to partisans encouraged by slave-propaganda propaganda. As in the Minsk sector, the mood of the Slovaks was very poor, which caused many to desert and surrender the 1st Czechoslovak Brigade that fought alongside the Red Army. In September and October 1943, the number of desertions in the Security Division increased significantly<sup>47</sup>. Undergoing decomposition, the Security Division was abolished by the Germans in October and transferred as a unit of work in Italy<sup>48</sup>.

The Slovak army has also got broken behind the front. On August 16, 1943, the 15,000 soldiers of the Tarnov garrison revolted against the authorities refusing

War 1938-1945, vol. I, Central and Southeast European Countries], București, Editura Militară, 1973, p. 86.

<sup>44</sup> A.M.A.E., Fond 71, 2ndWW, Vol. 303, General, f. 133.

<sup>45</sup> Others officers as Ján Nálepka or Otakar Jaroš have been decorated as post-mortem heroes of the Soviet Union, see *Istoria Țărilor Coroanei Cehe*, [History of the Czechs Crown Countries], București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2007, p. 468; see also František Cséfalvay, Lúbia Kázmerová, *op.cit.*, p. 103.

<sup>46</sup> Nicolae Ciachir, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>47</sup> Pavel Mičianik, *Veteráni východného frontu v povstaní. Pôsobenie niektorých vyšších povstaleckých dôstojníkov na východnom fronte* [Veterans on the eastern front in insurrection. The action of senior officers on the Eastern Front], in Marek Syrný (coord.), *Kolaborácia a odboj na Slovensku a v krajinách nemeckej sféry vplyvu v rokoch 1939-1945* [Collaboration and resistance in Slovakia and territories under German influence in 1939-1945], BanskáBystrica, Muzeum Slovenského Národného Povstania, 2009, p. 278-279.

<sup>48</sup> Elena Mannová (coord.), *Scurtă istorie a Slovaciei* [Short history of Slovakia], București, Editura Enciclopedică, 2001, p. 367.

to leave on the front or to work in the Reich<sup>49</sup>. In Officer in reserve Viliam Zingor refused in 1943 to lead the Slovakian troops to the Eastern Front. He called for the withdrawal of German troops from Slovakia, even if he did not find political support at the time<sup>50</sup>. He will then pass on the side of the partisans<sup>51</sup>. The Germans have noticed the Slovak army had lost confidence in its fighting force. The Romanians also had information about the state of the Slovak army. The loss of Slovakia's fighting capacity did not lead to political changes in the country and did not affect the political and military relations with Romania. The authorities were forced to continue their struggle with Germany, with every alternative and especially a victory for the Soviet army being considered a disaster for the Bratislava political regime. But the prolongation of the war began to be felt among the Slovaks who manifested dissatisfaction with the Germans: "The great times of the Czechoslovak Republic are regretted, and the ranks of the Czechoslovaks are increasing"<sup>52</sup>. In October 1943, Ferdinand Čatloš declared in a public speech: "In the course of this war, while making a forced bypass across the Ukrainian plain, the Slovak army is going to recapture and provide the rest of the Slovak territory with the nation"<sup>53</sup>. These were the last timid attempts to increase the morale of the Slovak army.

The Germans lost confidence in Slovak soldiers and tried, by various means, to take control of the country and the Slovak army. General Čatloš told Gheorghe Elefterescu this fact at a meeting in January 1944. "He controls us all, they ask for more than we can give them"<sup>54</sup>. Although the Germans were pushing Bratislava to increase Slovak troops on the front, army leaders understanding the risk that the Red Army could reach the Slovakian border, would have wanted to keep as many as possible at home to defend the national territory. At the same time, they had made a habit of reproaching the Germans that even the Hungarians did not make every effort to support the front, and that the Budapest leaders secretly negotiated the exit from the war. The Chief of Staff of the Slovak Republic complained to the Germans that Hungarians "do not do their duty on the front"<sup>55</sup>. For this reason, it was preferable to keep important reserves in the country in the event of a Slovak-Hungarian conflict. Thus, during 1943, the Slovak army represented by the Rapid Division and the Security Division, has disappeared as a fighting force. Losing

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<sup>49</sup> *The European Resistance*, vol. I, p. 88.

<sup>50</sup> Anton Spiesz, Dusan Caplovic, *op. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>51</sup> Róbert Letz, *op. cit.*, p. 273.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 199.

<sup>53</sup> A.M.A.E., Fond 71, Slovakia, vol. 4, f. 201.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibidem*, vol. 3, f. 237.

<sup>55</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 43, p. 203-204.

Germany's confidence, especially due to the great number of desertions, the Slovakian army was abolished and turned into a work unit behind the front, for the German fortification lines.

The dissolution of the Slovak army has not gone unnoticed in Romania. But the authorities had no attitude towards ending the existence of the Slovak army. There was no reaction of Romania to the dissolution of the Slovak army. For Romania, Slovakia had a greater political importance than the military.

### **SINUOSITIES OF ROMANIAN-SLOVAK COOPERATION**

Competing with Hungary for influence in Berlin, Romania and Slovakia were forced to increase their military and economic contribution. If Romania had the capacity to maintain its war effort, Slovakia suffered from this reality. Under the difficult circumstances of 1943, it was more important that the spending should be well thought for a potential post-war confrontation against Hungary. So both have sought to increase their country's army. Instead, other resources could be used to continue military efforts on the Eastern Front. Romania had the oil and Slovakia's industrial capacities. Both will try since 1943 to use these advantages in the competition with Hungary.

Gradually, there has been a change in the balance of interest between the two countries and Germany. The Bratislava regime became more servile towards Berlin, while in Bucharest the idea of a separate peace had grown. If, for Bratislava, separate peace had led to the disappearance of statehood, in the conditions in which an exiled Czechoslovak government was recognized by the great powers, in Bucharest separate peace was the solution for the preservation of statehood. Although the political and military situation of the Axis was deteriorating, the Romanian-Slovak relations were growing. Minister Pantazi told Slovak military attaché Jozef Parcan that the Romanian army was in the process of reorganization after the heavy winter battles. In turn, Ilie Șteflea tells the same attaché that "we have common, political and military interests, which we have to solve in the future". The Slovak attaché was not very confident about Romania's ability to cancel the Vienna decision without German support. But he was sure that an agreement between Hungary and Romania was impossible: "Romania - he appreciates - awaits the right moment to enter Transylvania and recover the lost territories". Parkan was afraid that Hungary enjoyed Germany's support, which made it a danger to neighbouring countries<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>56</sup> Petre Otu, *op. cit.*, p. 45.



Contacts between Romanians and Slovaks were recorded on the front. The head of the German air mission in Slovakia, General Ludwig Keiper, visited the Crimean front sector in April 1943. He was accompanied by the Slovak aviation leaders who expressed their wish to be received by Alexianu in Odessa<sup>57</sup>. As the Germans expressed satisfaction with the performance of the Slovak pilots, they had to become an example for the entire army. Keiper said on this occasion that "the Romanian soldier is an example of discipline, instruction and morality, not as soldiers of other allies", alluding to Slovak soldiers. The Germans also praised the Romanians and how they soon succeeded in rebuilding the Odessa industry and how they managed Transnistria<sup>58</sup>.

The contacts between the Romanian and Slovak soldiers were carried out directly, without the German intermediation. Based on the bilateral agreement, in April 1943, infantry master Gheorghe Pătrașci and artillery captain Vasile Anghel left for the Slovak Military School<sup>59</sup>. July has represented a moment of maximum military closeness between the two countries. On July 23, 1943, a solemnity took place at Elefterescu's home, where 20 Slovak officers, headed by General Čatloš, were decorated. "Already in the past year, Romania has shown how much the Slovak army appreciates when Marshal Antonescu, the ruler of the state, gave the highest Romanian military decoration – the order of Mihai Viteazul – to his Excellency, Mr. Čatloš, the creator of the Slovak army today. "If the future calls for it, the Romanian and Slovak armed forces will fight together for the realization of holy national rights", Elefterescu said on this occasion<sup>60</sup>.

An ample report of the situation in Slovakia from 8-17 July 1943 was sent to Romania by the Romanian military attaché in Bratislava. The Slovak Deputy Foreign Minister questioned Romania's losses and the fact that the Hungarians monitored the losses so that they could prepare themselves in the future if the situation requires it. A Hungarian deputy had declared in 1941 that "Hungary must have a large army of 1-1,5 million combatants permanently in order to be able to restore order in the war at the end of the war". The Slovaks were worried about the prospect of a confrontation with the Hungarian army in the future and needed the alliance with Romania to cope with Budapest's pressures. That is why they wanted to know if Romania's losses could be replaced for a possible confrontation in the West. The Romanian attaché denied this information and assured the

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<sup>57</sup> A.M.A.E., Fond 71, Slovakia, vol. 4, f. 183.

<sup>58</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 43, p. 206.

<sup>59</sup> Petre Otu, *op. cit.*, p. 380.

<sup>60</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 45, p. 213.

Slovakian minister that the troops could be filled. He said that the Slovaks too should be prepared to replace the losses in people and arms and “to prepare the mobilization of all the forces of the state to get the maximum power if and when it will be needed”. The Romanian attaché insisted especially on the need to train new military cadres and make stockpiles of ammunition<sup>61</sup>. In the report from July 18-27, the military attaché again assessed the situation in Slovakia. He reported that many of the quotes of Romanian politicians and Ion Antonescu were taken over by “Grenzbote” truncated or omitted. The Germans in Slovakia only took the paragraphs that pleased the policy of the Reich. That is why the paper did not refer to the Transylvanian issue<sup>62</sup>.

Elefterescu visited his Romanian officers on August the 1st, 1943, at the Piešťany Sanitary District and was very pleased with the way they were treated<sup>63</sup>. In October 1943, four Slovak officers visited the Romanian Aeronautical Industry from Braşov<sup>64</sup>. The visit was part of the regulations of the Romanian-Slovak economic agreement, renewed in 1943. But the difficulties of cooperation can be overtaken in this field as well. The problem of the purchase of Slovak armaments became difficult after the Battle of Stalingrad. Mihai Antonescu's move to Bratislava to obtain weapons was unsuccessful. The Romanian military attaché declared that the Slovaks claimed that they did not have this availability. “Still - the Romanian diplomat continues - from what I have seen, Slovakia has weapons for almost three army bodies, that is, it has them if necessary. Of course, the refusal is justified by the prudence with which he looks in the future, the Slovak General Staff wanting to have material reserves because it does not know how long the war will last and other material cannot buy or manufactured”<sup>65</sup>. Instead, the sympathy Romania enjoys in Slovakia can be traced from other perspectives. The Škoda factory in Dubnica had problems due to delays. All sorts of tricks the workers did to delay deliveries made the Germans accuse them of sabotage. However, deliveries to the Romanian army were not sabotaged and the orders were respected on time<sup>66</sup>.

Cooperation in the field of military information continued too. Colonel Pavel Kuna came to Bucharest in March 1943 and contacted Colonel Boian of the Second

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<sup>61</sup> *Ibidem*, doc. 43, p. 196.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibidem*, doc. 45, p. 210-211.

<sup>63</sup> A.M.A.E., Fond 71, Slovakia, vol. 13, f. 318.

<sup>64</sup> Petre Otu, *op. cit.*, p. 381.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 379.

<sup>66</sup> Alesandru Duşu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 43, p. 207.

Section of the Romanian Army General Staff<sup>67</sup>. The Slovaks spied on the endowment of the Hungarian army - especially they were interested in having Tiger tanks - but they were also following the mood in Hungary that collapsed when the Anglo-American landed in Sicily. The Slovaks also complained about the publication of a propaganda map of Greater Hungary (with Slovakia and Transylvania passed into mourning, with black paint) that was displayed in all public places in Hungary<sup>68</sup>. In November 1943, the head of the Special Intelligence Service (S.S.I.), I. Lissievici, received the mission to oversee the activity of the S.S.I. from Bratislava to be able to use the diplomatic mission in the capital of Slovakia and its links with neutral countries in order to probe the ground for an exit from the Axis<sup>69</sup>. Since Slovakia did not start negotiations for an armistice, the Romanian diplomatic action in Bratislava had no results. The Slovaks were carefully following the reorientation of Romania towards Anglo-Americans. On September 26th, 1943, Jozef Parcan reported to Bratislava data about King Michael's visit accompanied by Queen Elena, at the hospitals where British and American prisoners were cared for. He concluded his report by stating that "the reality is that all Romanian strata are Francophile and only on the current policy lies Germany" with reference to Marshal Antonescu's regime. On 11 February 1944, Slovak attaché Jozef Parcan reported that "the Marshal is convinced that the Germans lost the war and that their days are numbered"<sup>70</sup>. Parcan was worried about rumours circling through Romania that Marshal Antonescu could hand over the power of Iuliu Maniu, who was trying to negotiate a separate peace with the Soviets. At the same time Parkan noticed that in Bucharest everyone feared that Bessarabia was lost, but that Transylvania could be a compensation. In turn, the Romanians informed Bratislava of the Hungarian attempts to secretly negotiate with the Allies<sup>71</sup>. In September 1943, an attempt from Budapest was made to improve the Slovak-Hungarian relations, as they worried more and more about the military evolution on the eastern front<sup>72</sup>. In 1943, the Hungarians tried to negotiate with the Slovaks trying to persuade the Bratislava authorities on the danger of rebuilding Czechoslovakia. The reconstruction of Czechoslovakia was a real threat also for the Hungarian hopes of obtaining territorial rewards on Slovakia's behalf. The

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<sup>67</sup> Central National History Archives (hereinafter S.A.N.I.C.), Fund Ministry of the Interior, Directorate General of Police, 28/1942, f. 26.

<sup>68</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 43, p. 204-205.

<sup>69</sup> Cristian Troncotă, *op. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>70</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 46, p. 221.

<sup>71</sup> Jana Bauerová, *op. cit.*, p. 112.

<sup>72</sup> Alesandru Dușu, et al., *op. cit.*, doc. 46, p. 222.

Hungarians have accredited the idea that relations with Slovakia could reach a compromise that could not be achieved with Romania, due to the anti-Hungarian atmosphere that ruled in Bucharest<sup>73</sup>.

The personal relations between the Romanian and Slovak officers were not always tight. They were also influenced by Romania's and Slovakia's position on Hungary. This was proved by the gesture of Colonel Davidescu who left the post of military attaché in Bratislava and Budapest without paying good gratitude to his Slovak colleagues. He would have had the opportunity to do so if he accepted the invitation to attend, together with General Malar, the Slovakian attaché in Berlin, the military ski competitions organized in the Tatra Mountains near Poprad on 13-14 February 1943<sup>74</sup>. The moment was extremely delicate after the defeat at Stalingrad, and could be related to Mihai Antonescu's statements before Ivan Milecz in which he spoke of Romania's independence from Berlin. The Romanians showed their dissatisfaction with Slovakia's oscillations in their relations with Hungary, and the non-protocol gesture of the Romanian military attaché was a consequence of them. In February 1943, Mihai Antonescu reiterated to Ivan Milecz the idea of tightening the Romanian-Slovak-Croat collaboration in order to prepare a common strategy. The Slovak diplomat reported to Bratislava the discussion with Antonescu, but the position of Slovak Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka has not changed. He believed that a closer collaboration could only be made with the acceptance of Berlin. Tuka encouraged the Romanian side to resume the initiative of this triple collaboration<sup>75</sup>.

Ivan Milecz made a public statement in March 1943 underlining that "the sacrifices made by Romania on the Eastern Front justify a fair solution to the Romanian problems (...) Romania's contribution to this war is more important than the other allies of Germany"<sup>76</sup>. But the evolution of the front, totally unfavourable to the Axis, put Romania and Slovakia in the position of preparing for new events. He thus spoke of a possible total mobilization of the two countries and revealed that there were great difficulties in equipping and arming their armies. He held a rather optimistic, rather diplomatic tone, to Germany's chances of winning the war, which meant that there was great fear in Slovakia over a possible victory of the Soviet Union. Milecz's hopes at that time were linked to the fact that this victory was not wanted by Anglo-Americans<sup>77</sup>. Milecz watched carefully the

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<sup>73</sup> Jana Bauerová, *op. cit.*

<sup>74</sup> A.M.A.E., Fond 71, Slovakia, vol. 13, f. 194-195.

<sup>75</sup> Jana Bauerová, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

<sup>76</sup> *Eadem.*

<sup>77</sup> S.A.N.I.C., Fund Ministry of the Interior, Directorate General of Police, 54/1943, f. 238-

state of mind in Romania. He informed that in the event of an attack by the Anglo-Americans coming from the Balkans, Romania will not resist and will take advantage of the situation to return the weapons. At the same time Milecz was surprised that the Antonescu regime no longer enjoys popularity. Given that a possible defeat of Germany for Bratislava did not bring any guarantee of survival, the signals from Bucharest were not encouraging<sup>78</sup>.

Slovak Prime Minister Vojtech Tuka repeatedly asked Milecz to check Romania's position. In September, the Slovak diplomat met Mihai Antonescu. He was assured by the Romanian minister that the Romanian army is still a military force able to help Slovakia in a possible confrontation with Hungary<sup>79</sup>. In October, in a press conference, Mihai Antonescu explained the position of the country to international events. He vaguely hinted at some negotiations with neutral countries like Turkey. In the last months of 1943 Milecz believed that Romania would be willing to follow the Italian model of unconditional surrender. For the Bratislava government, the separate exit from the war was not an alternative. However, the Slovak press kept the same propaganda tone. A December article in the "Slovak" reminded that the Romanian army did not consider leaving the "brave German army"<sup>80</sup>.

Despite the unfavourable military situation, contacts between Romanians and Slovaks continued throughout 1943. They could even diversify, but they pursued the same goals. However, the various Romanian-Slovak ties were not enough to reach the desired outcome. Only the general context would prove to be decisive.

## CONCLUSIONS

The international political situation imposed a repositioning on relations with Germany, both in Bucharest and Bratislava but in Budapest too. The loss of the military initiative by the German army forced the ruling political circles in Romania and Slovakia to seek alternative solutions. This was compounded by the rapid deterioration of the Tripartite Pact relations. Romania sought to step away gradually from the Reich in anticipation of a favourable moment for the outbreak

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239; Tiso expressed his conviction to the Hungarian diplomat Lajos Kuhl de Boroshat that neither England nor America wanted a victory of the Soviets. See James Mace Ward, *op. cit.*, p. 236.

<sup>78</sup> Jana Bauerová, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

<sup>79</sup> *Eadem*, p. 114.

<sup>80</sup> *Eadem*, p. 115.

of war. For Slovakia this reality was unthinkable. In Bucharest, Ion Antonescu's viewpoint with the opposition movement was obvious. The methods of achieving the objectives were different. In Bratislava, the situation was different. For the circles around Tiso, the exit from the war was excluded. Instead, the opposition grew bigger and had other plans than power. The reaction was precisely the gradual dissolution of the army on the front, where it became obvious that co-operation with the Germans was supposed to end. The year 1943 represented the end of the Slovak army epic as a combative force on the Soviet front.

The complex political and military conjuncture of 1943 determined the oscillations in the Romanian-Slovak relations. It was not the dissolution of the Slovak army that conditioned the continuation of the collaboration. Redefinition of bilateral relations was given by the new situation. Both have retained their common interests in terms of Hungary. Although the solutions were different, the objective remained common. Romania's tendency to secede from the alliance with Germany did not correspond to that of Slovakia. Rather, the community of interest on the negotiation of a separate truce should bring it closer to Hungary. But precisely the problem of the Romanian-Hungarian common frontiers hinders any cooperation. In pursuing the interest at the western border Romania needed a common file with Slovakia. That is why the Romanian-Slovak relations remained good during the year 1943 independently of the action of the Slovak army.