

## ***The Romanian Battlefield in World War I***

By Glenn E. Torrey

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This book, amongst a steady publication of Great War titles lately, contributes to a far-less-studied theater among western works. Historian Glenn E. Torrey pledged to present a balanced survey of military operations and events on the Romanian Front, as well as to showcase the long-neglected Romanian Campaign in 1917. In seventeen chapters plus epilogue and conclusion, he does so admirably.

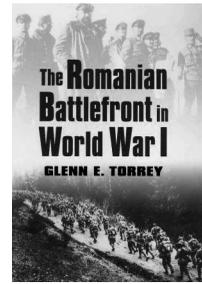
The early chapters set the stage. There is sufficient background on the Romanian state and pre-war politics. King Carol died in October 1914. His nephew Ferdinand generally has a reputation of being weak and indecisive. He was quite aloof socially, the opposite of popular Queen Marie, granddaughter of Queen Victoria and Tsar Alexander II, and very pro-Entente. Given Ferdinand's general reticence, Torrey categorizes Premier Ion C. Brătianu as a virtual dictator.

The tightrope diplomacy in which a minor power had to balance key interests and allies is a case study in its own right. Strained relations with Russia from the 1880s over the loss of southern Bessarabia ultimately did not trump the pre-eminent drive to acquire Transylvania with its ethnic Romanians, territory in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

The text provides a comprehensive assessment of the Romanian Army, the military instrument to deliver the prize. Bloodied in the recent Second Balkan War, it had some significant liabilities. There was a top-heavy officer corps and a relatively weak noncommissioned officer corps. More significantly, its training and doctrine had not benefited from sophisticated, ongoing, comprehensive assessment on the nature of the next war. There were few opportunities to incorporate the painful experience of other armies during two years of war, 1914-16. A weak industrial base precluded widespread force modernization (e.g., the proportion of machine guns, field, and heavy artillery). Convoluted diplomacy often prevented imports to fill the void in any significant numbers. Inadequate force modernization and levels were severe constraints in an army built around massive (27,000 soldiers) infantry divisions. Torrey assesses that mobilization was excessive. The navy was essentially a riverine force for operations on the lower Danube; the Austro-Hungarians dominated the upper Danube. The aviation service was only a year old at the time of intervention in the war.

Planning highlighted the challenges from volatile diplomacy. Romania was a secret member of the Triple Alliance from 1883 until 1913. Hence, war plans had focused against Russia. Concerted planning for a war against Austria-Hungary began in the tumultuous summer of crisis in 1914. Unsurprisingly, the main effort would be the northern front, an attack northwest across the Carpathians into Transylvania. The southern front, Romania's recently-acquired Dobrogean region, was secondary.

Romania's road to war was long. The text reviews the two-year neutrality, replete with a host of domestic issues and much diplomatic



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haggling. The chances that Romania would side with the Central Powers were slim. The conditions of her entry still occupied the Allies for some time. Ferdinand rose to the occasion; he essentially told the formal Council that the country was going to war. Romania joined the Allies in August 1916. A French Military Mission under General Henri M. Berthelot would exercise a strong influence, along with Russian and British advisors.

Despite long-running strategic challenges, Romania's leaders committed to the prosecution of a two-front war. Torrey covers these operations very well, essentially a chapter for each major effort. The Romanians achieved strategic and operational surprise and hence great, initial success in their long-awaited, popular offensive into Transylvania. The same was not the case for the Dobrogea to the south. Available Romanian troops, an economy of force, were still committed to a forward defense, with no plan to trade space for time. Combined operations with the Russians proved difficult. Bulgarian elements attacked with the same fervor which the Romanians demonstrated in Transylvania, seeing the Dobrogea as long-lost, national lands.

There is comprehensive examination of the Romanians' elementary, strategic choices in the fall of 1916 and their consequences. The Romanians opted for an ambitious counteroffensive in the south, on the Dobrogean front, known as the Flămânda Maneuver. It failed and Central Power retribution was sweeping and swift. Romania faced powerful, combined offensives. German Gen Erich von Falkenhayn led Austro-Hungarian and German forces in the north, ejected Romanian forces from Transylvania within forty days, and entered Romania proper. To the south, German General August von Mackensen led German, Bulgarian, and Turkish troops through the Dobrogea and into the heart of Romania. He captured Bucharest on 6 December 1917.

Success for the Central Powers was neither easy nor cheap, but they had broken the Romanian Army and shaken the nation state to its foundations. Romania survived, but lost two-thirds of its territory and vast resources, largely Wallachia besides the Dobrogea. Torrey reviews the cost with some fascinating statistics, including casualties; lost equipment; and expropriated resources, especially grain and oil.

The Entente rallied to the aid of the rump Romanian state, a little-known case study in building partner capacity quickly under adverse circumstances. The text provides a thorough analysis of this reconstruction of the Romanian Army with thematic topics (e.g., reconstruction [reorganization], epidemics, morale, instruction [training], and rearmament), backed by detailed statistics, all well documented. The Danube fleet and aviation service received similar attention. The overwhelming bulk of military trainers were French, with due recognition of national and cultural clashes.

Romania fought with skill and determination in 1917, and Torrey recounts these actions with flair in detail. Three major battles at Mărăști, Mărășești, and Oituz between late July and early September stymied complete enemy conquest. Romanian success had come with much effective Russian help, despite the March Revolution. The Bolsheviks, however, left Romania isolated and too weak to continue the war alone. Romania agreed to an armistice at Focșani on 5 December 1917, yet

provided “peace-keeping” forces to ensure order in the newly-declared “Moldavian Republic” in Bessarabia. Further, tortuous negotiations resulted in the “Preliminary Peace” of Buftea on 5 March 1918. The Treaty of Bucharest followed on 5 May.

The events of 1918 were no less amazing than the last two years. Domestic and external events reflected complex chaos. Romanian leaders struggled to achieve some unity and maintain national spirit with viable institutions. They conformed to treaty obligations to concede only minimums as late as possible. Accommodation rested upon realistic pragmatism, not a genuine spirit of cooperation. Army demobilization, perforce gradual, did not preclude the preservation of a properly-equipped core. Somewhat hesitantly and at the proverbial eleventh hour, Romania mobilized formally on 9 November 1918 and reentered the war on the side of the Allies on 10 November, less than twenty-four hours before the armistice took effect on the Western Front. The King and Queen returned to Bucharest five days short of the two-year anniversary of von Mackensen’s triumphant entry.

American readers tend to focus on that Armistice and the Treaty of Versailles, but the Great War required many more armistices and treaties to end conflict around the world. Indeed, fighting continued. Moreover, even major combat operations in the region had very much been for, with, and among the people. Romanian troops now fought to stem the rising tide of Bolshevism from a broken Russia amidst the breakup of the Hapsburg empire and the receding tide of a defeated Germany, and within the context of a web of multitudes of ethnic tensions. Romania’s major effort was against the new Soviet republic declared in Hungary by Béla Kun. While balancing constantly-changing diplomatic imperatives, Romania advanced all the way to Budapest, taking the Hungarian capital on 3 August 1919.

Romania’s war had been a painful see-saw between ecstatic victory and abject defeat, but the Treaty of Trianon in March 1920 nearly doubled the country’s territory and population. Romanian diplomats had argued vociferously for the Allies to honor the promises from 1916. The Army had been the key instrument to achievement.

Torrey’s monograph is a major case study in the constant exchange between politicians and generals, and how they wielded landpower to accomplish well-known, long-held, and ambitious policy goals. Torrey tells this story carefully and well. His mastery of Romanian sources was already well established; he consulted French and German materials, along with very select British and American, as well. The selection of photos laced throughout complements the text most effectively. The style of maps, many adapted, can be rather busy, but they are important. This work represents a commendable effort to recount a forgotten front and close a long-incomplete account.