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THE BATTLE AT MARASESTI

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Rumania - r.r.g.)

The following is a full translation of an article by V. Vinegradov, Doctor of Historical Sciences, which appeared in the Soviet weekly New Times, No. 36 or 1 September 1967:

This summer Rumania has celebrated the 50th anniversary of the battle at Marasesti. It was one of the bloody battles in which the Rumanian army took part during the first World War. And it is worth recalling the history of the battle.

Rumania entered the war after the other European states -- in August 1916. Not because the Rumanian rulers were moved by any particular love of peace. By no means. They were not at all white lambs in the black flock of imperialist predators. The guns had scarcely begun to boom when the Rumanian Prime Minister, Ionel Bratianu, entered into a deal concerning the supposed booty. But the fear of guessing wrong and joining the losing side caused him to "hurry slowly".

The question of Rumania's territorial claims had long been a stumbling block in its negotiations with the Entente concerning her entry into the war. At the time about 3,000,000 Rumanians were living beyond Rumania's borders, in Austro-Hungary. And the Rumanian oligarchy did not fail to use this fact in appearing before the people in the role of an unselfish champion of national interests.

In point of fact "national unification", in the form in which it was planned by the Rumanian leaders, was linked with the enslavement of neighboring non-Rumanian territories. In their negotiations with the Entente they wanted to obtain part of the territory of the Ukraine and Hungary, as well as some Serbian land in the western Banat. In this connection Lenin noted: "There is a secret pact with Rumania and it lays down that Rumania will receive a whole list of other peoples if it fights on the side of the Allies."

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The Rumanian proletariat and the Social Democratic party did not fall into the trap of the pseudo-patriotic propaganda and were able to see through the aggressive designs of the bourgeoisie. But the majority of those who received their draft papers in August 1916 accepted the official propaganda and the lofty appeals of the royalist proclamation at their face value.

A fairly large Rumanian army [with more than 700,000 bayonets and sabers] consisted of poorly armed and still more poorly trained men. There was a shortage of career officers even in peacetime. Artillery was lacking, and the reserve divisions were equipped with obsolete guns. The situation was so serious that guns dating back to the Russo-Turkish War [1877-1878] were dismounted from the forts and transported to the front on ox carts. Machine guns were a rarity.

The military successes of the Rumanians in Transylvania did not last long. The news of the blows struck by the German General Mackensen in the south from the direction of Bulgaria compelled the Russian general staff to stop the offensive in the north and begin transferring regiments to the Danube. Then the Germans and Austrians began to exert pressure in Transylvania. The Rumanian reinforcements which were moving towards the south were ordered to return. Everywhere the initiative was lost. The whole plan for offensive operations was torn up and the Rumanian general staff began a period of passive waiting.

The most varied sources agree on one point: the weakest link in the Rumanian army was its command. "Fear gripped the supreme command", wrote the Rumanian general Averescu in his diary after the first blows struck by the Bulgarians and Austrians in the south. Field Marshal Hindenberg noted that "an evil fate has befallen Rumania: its army has not moved. Its leaders have understood nothing, and we have succeeded in mustering sufficient forces in Transylvania in time."

At the beginning of October a British military agent at Budapest reported that "the first and second armies must be considered to be demoralized, not because the troops are unsuitable, but because the command is bad." The French held the same opinion. Their representative on the Russian high command, General Jeannon, wrote:

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"The Rumanian soldiers are good. Their morale is good. The young officers are extremely inexperienced, but some of the leaders are very afraid, and that is the reason for their recent failures." And if the Germans and Allies got bogged down for two months at the Carpathian passes [Vulcan, Predyal and the Red Tower] this is primarily explained by the fact that the Rumanian infantry, aware that their country was threatened ^{by} the mortal blow of invasion, dug in and fought bitterly, often with rifles and bayonets alone. But in November the resistance of the Rumanians was broken everywhere. Their decimated troops retreated in the face of the enemy's pressure.

The Russian Allied Command, surprised at this turn of events, was late in sending reinforcements. It did not take seriously the unexpected requests for aid which began to arrive from Bucharest at the beginning of October and which were sent by the prime minister, the King and even the Queen. General Alekeysev wrote on one request: "I do not understand the nervousness of the Rumanians. They have considerable forces at their disposal and yet they can only bemoan their critical situation." Moreover the transfer of Russian reinforcements to aid the Rumanians was accompanied by enormous difficulties. Russian and Rumania were linked by only one railway with an extremely limited capacity.

The Russian staff insisted that the defeated Rumanian troops should avoid major battle, retreat and join forces with the incoming Russian army. General Brusilov, the commander of the southwestern front, wrote in November: "In the existing circumstances it would be wrong to fight a major battle with the defeated troops against a victorious enemy who is twice as strong, because any such action would inevitably result in the complete annihilation of the Rumanian army". Yet the Rumanian high command decided to give battle at the approaches to Bucharest and lost. As the winter drew on and the roads deteriorated the Russian units were thrown into battle after exhausting marches [the railways by this time were disorganized] and the Russians ran headlong into crowds of refugees, including Rumanian troops, who were exhausted, hungry, weary, looking like ghosts.

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"Our army seems to have been struck by paralysis" wrote General Averescu. "Everything depends on the resistance of the Russians, and they for their part are dependent on the carrying capacity of the railways." In this case General Averescu can be considered a most competent observer, because all the units which remained in action had been placed under his command. But there were not many of them: out of 24 Rumanian divisions which had been mobilized in August only six remained and they were well below strength; out of seven hundred thousand officers and men, only 70,000 [one tenth] were left.

In the course of heavy fighting the Russian troops stopped the enemy on the River Siret in 1917. The 300 mile front became stabilized. Less than one-tenth of the front was held by Rumanian units. Out of 609 battalions 74 were Rumanian. For six months the entire weight of the defense of Rumania rested on the Russian army of 1,000,000 men. A new Rumanian army was hastily being formed in the rear. General Prezanu needed several weeks in order to rally the men who had lost their units. Additional mobilization was carried out in areas which had not been occupied by the enemy, and the army was reinforced with recruits who had been removed from the occupied areas, i.e., with those who had survived the terrible campaign in the north. The soldier-peasant, motivated by the desire to liberate his country from the invaders, to return to his home and family, withstood all the suffering. The training was prolonged. Assistance to the Rumanian officers was given by a French mission headed by General Bertel.

By the summer of 1917 the Rumanian army had been reformed. It included fifteen infantry and two cavalry divisions with 400,000 men. These troops became the main force on the front, which was no longer Rumanian in name only but also in fact. The weary Russian divisions, many of which were in a state of revolutionary ferment and did not wish to fight, were gradually replaced by Rumanians. In the summer the Germans and Allies felt the weight of the blows struck by the Rumanians.

At dawn on the 24th July units of the third Rumanian division, which had approached the German positions at Marasesti unobserved, broke into enemy trenches. After bitter fighting the Germans abandoned the village in disorder under the threat of encirclement.

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Then the enemy was hit by units to the north and south of Marasesti. Every hilltop in this mountainous area was taken by storm. The second Rumanian army had Russian units on its flanks. In a few days 500 sq kilometers of territory, and thirty villages were occupied. The Rumanians captured about 3,000 prisoners and 45 guns, while the Russians took 1,000 prisoners and 40 guns. This major success was not developed because of the general situation and the troops were ordered to halt.

General Mackensen immediately began to prepare his counter-attack. His plan provided for the German troops to attack using the Ninth Army in the direction of Focsani-Marasesti-Adjud, while the first Austrian army was to operate to the north in the valley of the Oituz River in order to join the German forces at Adjud, to eliminate the Rumanian forces who were to be caught in a pincer movement, to occupy the whole of Rumania and open up the road to South Russia. Mackensen had no doubt that he would win. He commanded the operation personally and on leaving Bucharest told his officers to meet him in two weeks time in Yassi. On the 6th of August twelve German divisions crossed the valley of the Siret to begin the attack. The timing was good: at that moment the fourth Russian army was being replaced by Rumanian troops but the German troops encountered bitter resistance.* The 32nd and 36th Rumanian regiments particularly distinguished themselves in the battle from the 6th to 9th August.

On 10 August, after an artillery bombardment carried out by Rumanian and Russian batteries, the Rumanian troops launched a counter-attack in the course of which the enemy suffered heavy losses. On the following day the initiative was again seized by the Germans. The fighting lasted day and night. The German regiments launched up to eight attacks in 24 hours. On the 17th August their offensive was stopped, but not for long. On the 19th Mackensen, neither sparing his troops nor counting his losses, again moved forward. The village of Marasesti was almost occupied. The houses, railway station and the sugar factory were burned down. The Germans succeeded in occupying the station, or more precisely, its ruins. When they broke through the stubborn defense of two Rumanian regiments (the 47th and 51st) it seemed that the battle was decided. The German units still had to take the heights dominating the village. But a machine-gun company led by a Rumanian captain,

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Grigore Ignata, was successfully dug in on this hill. The company perished to a man, but its heroic resistance enabled the Rumanian command to gain enough time to transfer reserves and restore the front. The situation was saved.

The German attacks grew weaker. The Austrians were not successful in the Valley of the Oituz. The German casualties amounted to 47,000 killed and wounded. Heavy losses were suffered by the Rumanian and Russian units [27,500 Rumanian and 25,000 Russian including those lost without trace]. The Germans only succeeded in holding a fraction of the small area which they had originally seized.

The battle at Marasesti marked the rebirth of the Rumanian army, which 50 years earlier had defended its country against the invaders. This event went down in history as one of the many examples of the heroism of the Russian and Rumanian troops who fought shoulder to shoulder against a common enemy.

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