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Military counterespionage against Romania executed by the directorate of the independent gendarme corps from Bessarabia

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Abstract

The Russian Empire, with centuries-old imperial traditions, was based on military force, in which a significant role was played by the accumulation of information about opponents and the fight against foreign espionage inside the country. Based on a substantial collection of original historiographical material amassed through research in the National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, the author provides an analysis of the activity and results achieved by the Russian counterintelligence services. This work was conducted by the Independent Corps of Gendarmes, specifically represented by the Directorate of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Bessarabia, against the alleged activities of Romanian military espionage in the Russian Empire. The study is part of a larger work, devoted to the activity of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Bessarabia, whose activity, from a military point of view, was mostly directed against Romania.

Keywords:
secret services; Russian Empire; intelligence services; espionage; counterespionage.

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From its beginnings, the Government Directorate of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Bessarabia was concerned with combating Romania's influence in the region and intercepting the activity of the Romanian secret services in gathering information of a military nature in its area of responsibility, activities which are considered counter-espionage. In order to prohibit the penetration of Romanian spies into secure areas, the Instruction elaborated for the Gendarmerie Corps of June 5, 1882, forbade the access of foreigners and established a regime of increased security for the fortresses of Hotin and Tighina (Bender), on the railways of the entire territory of Bessarabia with the infrastructure related – bridges, stations, tunnels, viaducts, depots, adjacent roads and others (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 4, 28 verso). The gendarme corps was tasked with compiling lists of persons of foreign citizenship who live in the territories bordering Romania in a depth of approximately 50 km., or along the Chisinau-Ungheni railway, in a depth of up to 10 km., or around the fortress of Tighina (Bender) within a radius of 25 km (Ibidem, 55 verso), and in case they are suspected of acts of espionage, secret surveillance should be instituted over them.

The first operative action against an alleged espionage attempt on the part of Romania took place in October 1883. On October 5, 1883, the Russian consul in Iași announced to the head of the Government Directorate of the Gendarmerie Corps, Colonel Ianov, that two spies, Alexandru Sdrobici and Petru Argentoianu, with the mission of studying, from a military point of view, the districts adjacent to the state border (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 15, 118). Both crossed the border through the Ungheni customs point, from where they continued their journey to Bălți, being followed by agents of the Gendarmerie Directorate. In Bălți they stopped at Bancic's hotel where they had meetings with Adolf Poizner and Anastasie Carp (Ibidem, 133 verso). Following the operative investigation, it was found that both Adolf Poizner and Anastasie Carp were Romanian citizens, both former career officers of the Romanian army. In Bessarabia, Adolf Poizner held the position of administrator of the domains in the village of Baroncea of the monastery of St. Spiridon in Iași, but at the same time, in case of necessity, he traveled to the places of maneuver carried out by the Romanian army. Anastasie Carp, for his part, was a reserve officer and leased land in the village of Ustia, Glodeni. Both, according to the gendarmes, were capable of transmitting information of a military nature transposed on the map (Ibidem, 134). The problem for the gendarmes was that they had not been caught red-handed and no incriminating evidence had accumulated against all four; this allowed Alexandru Sdrobici and Petru Argentoianu to return to Romania on October 10, 1883. The government gendarmerie directorate did not dramatize the situation in this particular case, because, as they reported to the upper echelon, Russia was roamed far and wide, officially, by Romanian officers from the remount service, tasked with procuring horses for the Romanian army, who all the possibilities to study the military potential of Russia unhindered in the lands where they were moving (Ibidem, 134 verso).

Another case occurred in 1885. Before the War of Independence, several hundred Romanian deserters gathered on the territory of Bessarabia who, on March 3, 1876,

were deported to Astrakhan, Vologda, Samara and Ufa governorates. In 1885, the government allowed these former deserters to leave their original places of residence and choose other places of residence. It was not surprising that most of them chose Bessarabia, of which 452 settled in Ismail land, recently retroceded to the Russian Empire and where Romanian legislation was preserved. From the observations of the local gendarmes, many of these returnees had military training and behaved suspiciously, and 92 of them disappeared and couldn not be found. Taking into account what had been reported, the Government Directorate of the Bessarabian Gendarmerie Corps, through the address of September 30, 1890, submitted to the Ministry of the Interior, proposed that these people be deported again to one of the four distant governments of the empire. The officials in the Ministry were not as cruel as those in Chisinau, and they allowed them to stay in Bessarabia, but outside the 50 km security zone along the state border with Romania (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 4, 77).

The gendarmes, who in parallel were also responsible for carrying out counter-espionage measures, with the detailed verification of hikers coming from Romania, had a lot of trouble. Thus, on June 5, 1911, a ship arrived at Ismail with 250 excursionists from Romania, most of them civil servants and teachers from Tulcea, with their wives, but among them, there were also three officers. The aid officer of the head of the Ismail State Gendarmerie Corps, Lieutenant-Colonel M. Afanasiev, without consulting superiors, allowed the vessel to enter Ismail port and disembark tourists (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 155, 196). The excursion took place without incidents, the excursionists were greeted at the pier by the city's officialities, and they visited the historical places of the city. At 19.00. in the chords of the Romanian national anthem, the ship with the tourists returned to the country (Ibidem, 200). The internal investigation carried out within the Directorate found that in this case there were no violations of Russian legislation, all the excursionists visited Ismail based on state border crossing certificates and on the list approved by the Russian consulate in Galati, and about the arrival excursionists, lieutenant-colonel M. Afanasiev reported personally, on June 11, 1911, to the head of the Directorate, during his stay at Ismail (Ibidem, 209).

On June 24 of the same year, the second excursion took place, in which 486 people participated, among whom not a single officer was observed. However, just in case, secret surveillance was instituted on the excursionists, which did not identify any espionage attempts, the excursion being of a recreational nature (Ibidem, 210).

The last excursion of Romanian tourists took place on June 18, 1914, when a group of 400 people left Galați for Odessa, where they stayed for a few days, and on June 22 they returned to Galaţi. According to the report of Lieutenant-Colonel M. Afanasiev, who supervised the excursion, nothing suspicious was observed during the Romanians' stay on Russian soil, as there were no military personnel among the excursionists (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 284, 4).

Obviously, the gendarmes were not concerned about the trips of tourists from Romania, but much more serious things, such as the case of the painter Constantin Manoliu, suspected of espionage activities for the benefit of Romania. Constantin Manoliu was a Romanian citizen, who studied at the painting school in Bucharest and the commercial college in Iași. In March 1911 he came to Bessarabia to specialize in religious art and in search of commissions to paint icons in churches under construction. After several searches, on September 10, 1911, he obtained the order to paint icons in the church under construction in the town of Novoselita, located on the border with Austria-Hungary (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 158, 2). In a short time, the local policeman suspected Constantin Manoliu of hiding under the mask of a painter, but in reality, he was a Romanian spy, a fact he reported to Lieutenant-Colonel Belevțev, in charge of the counterintelligence service, in Kiev. Lieutenant-Colonel Belevțev's arguments in support of the policeman's thesis were interesting: truant lifestyle, relations with suspicious persons living in the direct vicinity of the state border, among whom were the local priest, the head of the railway station, the head of the post office, plus Moldovans from the locality. All these, according to the opinion of the official from Kiev, were clear indications that Constantin Manoliu was a Romanian spy (Ibidem, 7). The policeman was even more explicit when he characterized C. Manoliu, a graduate of the painting school in Bucharest with a specialization internship in Paris, as a worthless painter who had elementary knowledge about art (Ibidem, 13 verso). From the policeman's report, it appeared that he had completed his studies at the Academy of Painting in St. Petersburg and only a merciless fate had made him a policeman in Novoselita. In order to clarify the situation, on January 24, 1912, the file regarding Constantin Manoliu's alleged espionage was transferred to the head of the Government Directorate of the Bessarabian Gendarmerie Corps, Colonel C. Nordberg (Ibidem, 15). The investigation carried out by the officers of the Government Directorate of Gendarmes did not find any facts in the activity of C. Manoliu that would confirm his espionage activity in favor of Romania and the need to be expelled from the Russian Empire. However, just in case, secret surveillance was instituted on him, the results of which are not known.

A similar case took place in 1913 when the Romanian citizen Dimitrie Sandu was accused of spying for Romania. He was born in 1876 in Galați, he was married, the father of 7 children, a photographer by profession, and in search of a better income, in 1911, he moved with his family to Chisinau, where he signed contracts with the photography workshops of Renbrandt and Shvarzman for taking orders from the province regarding the enlargement of the pictures on the photographs (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 232). For this purpose, he traveled through Bessarabia in search of orders, which could only come from wealthy people, including the military. While taking over the order to enlarge the photographs of the officers of the 14th Artillery Brigade, in the conversations held with the officers he showed good knowledge in the field of military history and artillery (Ibidem, 9) a fact that worried the local authorities, who suspected him of being a Romanian military spy, who under the

pretext of collecting orders traveled through Bessarabia and studied the military infrastructure of the region. On the order of the head of the counterintelligence service of the Odesa Military Region, Lieutenant-Colonel Apleceev, on the night of April 24-25, 1913, a search was made in his apartment, which found that his letters were of a private nature and did not contain secret material. Despite the fact that the investigation did not establish that Dimitrie Sandu belonged to the Romanian spy network, he was, just in case, expelled from the country as a suspect (Ibidem, 57).

Closely related to the case of Dimitrie Sandu was the investigation launched against Gheorghe Constantinescu, a Romanian citizen and business associate of Dimitrie Sandu. It all started on April 10, 1914, when at the request of the Romanian government, Gheorghe Constantinescu was detained in Ismail, prosecuted for spending the money of the clients of the branch of the "Moravia" Bank in Brăila for personal purposes (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 301, 116 verso), who took refuge in Bessarabia, where he began to practice photography. During the search, three topographical maps of the Hotin, Soroca and Bălți lands were found, the 1895 edition of the Gruzințev printing house in Chișinău, in which some routes were marked and some families were marked in Romanian. Based on the accumulated evidence, on April 17, 1914, Lieutenant-Colonel M. Afanasiev, the deputy head of the Governor's Department of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Ismail, decides to start a criminal trial against Gheorghe Constantinescu for espionage in favor of Romania, with the defendant being held under guard in Ismail prison (Ibidem, 1). At first glance, the case was easy and did not present great difficulties, especially after the examination of the maps, carried out on May 3, 1913, by the colonel of the 14th Artillery Brigade D. Dimidenco and the captain of the General Staff, C. Jihor, who found that the itinerary of the movement of Gh Constantinescu coincided with the concentration districts of the Austro-Hungarian and Romanian armies, which means that they were not chosen casually, but were suggested in advance by people who were aware of the strategic plans of both countries (Ibidem, 53 verso). Of the dozens of families marked on the map, which represented the clients of the unfortunate photographer, three attracted the attention of the gendarmes - Popovici, Stroescu and Haimovici. Even if the families were not accompanied by the patronymic, the gendarmes assumed that in the case of the Popovici family, otherwise quite widespread in Bessarabia and Romania, it was either Major Popovici, head of the Romanian army's espionage service, or the Russian sailor Vasile Popovici who became a spy, or Valer Popovici-Hațevici, a Romanian doctor residing in Odesa, known for his espionage activities in favor of Romania and, finally, Popovici Ion, a Romanian citizen, suspected of espionage (Ibidem, 52). Throughout the investigation, the defendant did not admit his guilt and insisted on his innocence (Ibidem, 116).

The investigation found that Gheorghe Constantinescu, a Romanian citizen, born on April 5, 1882 in Brăila, of a Greek father and a Romanian mother, graduated from the 4th grade of the local primary school, with the mandatory military

service completed during the years 1904-1908, in Galați, employed at the branch of the "Moravia" bank in Brăila, he fled Romania in 1912 after embezzling money from the bank's customers. During two years, 1912-1914, he worked as a traveling photographer and traveled, together with Dimitrie Sandu, all throughout Bessarabia in search of orders. To facilitate his movement in the region, he procured a geographical map of Bessarabia, legally edited in Chisinau, where he wrote down the names and addresses of his clients, as well as the most convenient routes to reach their destination. The investigation revealed his unattractive psychological profile, which did not match that of a professional spy. Arriving in Russia in the company of a certain Sabina Țumer, who became his mistress, he lived on her money, and after the latter changed her master, a policeman from Tiraspol (Ibidem, 117 verso), he went to Vadul Rașcov, where he married Ana Lungu, the daughter of the owner of a local brewery (Ibidem, 123), but soon divorced him after he found out that she got pregnant by the psalmist of the local church (Ibidem, 125 verso). Constantly looking for money, he begged for help from the exponents of the Greek diaspora in Chisinau, A. Sinadino, the bankers Kapitanopulo and Nikolaidi (Ibidem, 119 verso). Thus, after all the attempts to make Gheorghe Constantinescu, a simple adventurer, a military spy, the investigation got confused in its own conclusions, entering a deadlock, without bringing conclusive evidence that Gheorghe Constantinescu was acting as a military spy in favor of Romania.

In order to prove its importance and the necessity of increasing the amount allocated to secret operations, the Government Directorate of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes urgently needed to present at least a few successes in the fight against Romanian espionage. The previous three failures did not discourage the gendarmes, they found another nest of Romanian spies. This time the victim was chosen in the person of Alexandru Petrovici, a Serbian citizen residing in Reni. Born in Mitrovica, he graduated from the Military School in Graz (Austria), but during the Serbian War of 1876 (part of the Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878), the second lieutenant of the Austrian army, Alexandru Petrovici, deserted from the unit and joined the Serbian army, participating to the war, being wounded twice in battles with the Turks. After the end of the war, in 1878 he moved to Russia, and in 1911 he settled in Reni, where he opened a mineral water store (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 340, 6 verso). However, the most suspicious thing, in the view of Russian officials, was the fact that he traveled very often to Bucharest, where his sister lived, married to a Romanian officer, had many acquaintances among the state officials in the Rhine and, the most suspicious thing, at home he spoke in German, although he was a Serb by nationality (Ibidem, 5). All the indications "clearly indicated" that Alexandru Petrovici was a Romanian spy, for which he was arrested on December 6, 1914. The investigation carried out, as usual, did not find evidentiary material to confirm the person's guilt, however, just in case, it decided that Alexandru Petrovici, an elderly person (at the time of the trial he was 62 years old), should be deported to the Tomsk region (Ibidem, 1). The gendarmes' error cost Alexandru Petrovici his life, as he could not bear the long journey of 4,800 km, dying on March 27, 1915 (Ibidem, 99).

The last case of "catch" of an alleged Romanian spy took place in 1915, a case that even angered the governor of Bessarabia, Mihail Ghilhen. Thus, the counterintelligence service of the General Staff of the Odessa Military Region notified its colleagues in Chisinau, the Government Directorate of Gendarmes, that according to the reliable data they possess, the Romanian citizen residing in Ismail, Buiumen Kohn, a grain entrepreneur, travels often in Romania where he is on friendly terms with the police commissioner of Lascăr Catargiu commune (Tulcea county), Victor Melega. These facts required his immediate arrest under the charge of being a Romanian spy (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 366, 43). After the file reached the table of the governor of Bessarabia, the latter, exasperated by the failures of his subordinates, examining the file, found that he did not see Buiumen Kohn's actions as complicity in espionage in favor of Romania, and for this reason, he considered the given case as closed (Ibidem, 26).

Thus, as it appears from the study materials, during the researched period, the Government Directorate of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Bessarabia did not detect any spy who would have acted in favor of Romania. The fact is explained not by the lack of any interest on the part of the General Staff of the Romanian Army towards the Russian military potential, especially the one in Bessarabia, but by the accuracy and professionalism of the respective Romanian services, which did not need spies in the true sense of the word, but they relied on the population of the region, who willingly informed about all the changes in the military field. As reported by Colonel C. Nordberg, the head of the Government Directorate of Gendarmes, to the governor of Bessarabia, Mihail Ghilhen, in his secret report of March 24, 1913, information of a military nature was transmitted to Romania by the population of Bessarabia (A.N.R.M., F. 2, inv. 1, d. 9383, 1); the remedy would have been their expulsion from the districts adjacent to the state border (Ibidem, 25 verso). The problem, however, was that you could not expel the entire population from Bessarabia, studded with military objects.

Due to the impossibility of catching real Romanian spies, they had to be invented, thus giving rise to a true phenomenon of hysteria regarding the discovery of Romanian spies. It is important to mention the fact that, in addition to Bessarabian Romanians and Jews, they were accused of espionage in favor of Romania. Thus, on March 31, 1916, Berko Shprintzak was arrested, who, while traveling by train on the Chisinau-Orhei route, at the entrance to the city, near which engineering works were being carried out, started to sign something in his notebook, assuming that he copied the map with the positions of the defense nests (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 1, d. 415, 10). On November 12, 1915, the resident of Chisinau, Iosif Grobokopatel, was detained, on the grounds that he was interested in the newly arrived contingent in the Chisinau garrison if there were no fellow citizens among those who arrived. Vigilant soldiers detained him and escorted him to the command, where it was found that the said Iosif Grobokopatel lived right opposite the recruitment center and therefore had every possibility to follow the movement and replenishment of the

troops. Having no other reason than the one invoked, the local authorities removed him from Chisinau, expelling him from the territory of the Odessa Military Region (A.N.R.M., F. 297, inv. 4, d. 60, 41 verso).

Citizens Leiba Shmutz and Kolman Vegner, both from Sculeni, who, as the local gendarmes assumed, were guided from Iași, were accused of organizing a spy network in favor of Romania, which led them to their arrest and transportation, on July 21, 1915, to the prison in Chisinau. The objective investigation, carried out by the judges of the Civil Court, found that the persons in question had been unjustly accused and on October 24, 1915, they were released from prison (A.N.R.M., F. 2, inv. 1, d. 9508, 18).

Sometimes the hysteria of discovering spies took on bizarre forms. Thus, on May 3, 1915, the peasant from Lipcani, Maria Piven, maiden name - Cebotari, was detained on the banks of the Prut River, as she was talking across the river with a Romanian soldier (A.N.R.M., F. 2, inv. 1, d. 9556, f. 1). The investigation proved that Maria Piven (Cebotari) was not a member of any Romanian espionage network, but simply the mistress of the Romanian soldier, who every night sneaked into her house, located on the banks of the Prut river.

On May 2, 1916, the woman Maria Cecoi, born Donțu, was detained and imprisoned in the Bălți prison, accused of espionage in favor of Romania. Following the investigation, it was found that the person could not be a spy, because she was actually suffering from a mental disease, a fact documented by medical expertise. There were more such cases, which once again demonstrates the degree of hysteria that gripped the official circles in Bessarabia on the eve of the revolution.

Conclusions

In the end, we can conclude that the activity of the Government Directorate of the Independent Corps of Gendarmes from Bessarabia in the field of informative and counter-informative activity was contradictory. In the information field, the Directorate could boast of some successes achieved thanks to a well-organized network of its secret agents for the collection of information of a military nature regarding Romania, information transmitted through Chisinau to the higher bodies in Odesa and St. Petersburg. However, this information had a tactical and, less often, operative character, and did not decisively influence the decision-making process regarding Romania by the supreme bodies of the Russian Empire. It was not uncommon for agents to provide their superiors with erroneous news, especially in the political field. If in the informative field, the Directorate's activity can be regarded as satisfactory, in the counter-informative field the results were disastrous. During the entire investigated period, until Romania entered into the war on the side of the Entente, and implicitly on the side of Russia, with all the efforts made by the officials

of the Directorate, no Romanian spy was detected who had been active in Bessarabia in favor of Romania. Even taking into account the sympathy of the population towards Romania, which daily transmitted information across the Prut, the question remains open as to whether the General Staff of the Romanian army sent specially trained agents to Bessarabia to obtain information of vital interest to the army.

References

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