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The Modernization of Romanian Military Thinking on the Eve of the Balkan Wars and the First World War (1912-1916)

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Abstract

The article analyzes the process of adapting Romanian military thinking to the fundamental transformations of modern warfare during the period 1912–1916. Drawing on Western doctrinal influences and military experiences from the Balkan Wars, the study highlights the gap between conceptual modernization and the institutional capacity to implement it. It argues that the Romanian Army entered World War I with a formally modernized doctrine, but with structural limitations that affected its initial operational efficiency.

Keywords:
Military Doctrine; Romanian Army; Modern Warfare; Military Modernization; Balkan Wars; World War I.

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Introduction

The transformations of European warfare at the beginning of the 20th century radically changed the nature of armed conflict, leading to what contemporary historiography defines as "modern warfare" (Strachan 2001, 19-45). In the early decades of the 20th century, European war underwent profound changes, driven by industrialization, the development of automatic weaponry, the expansion of railway networks, and the emergence of mass conflicts, which resulted in a form of total conflict, surpassing the traditional frameworks of maneuver warfare (Howard 2009, 109-133). These changes modified not only the techniques, tactics, and procedures of fighting, but also the conceptual foundations of military art. For Romania, a state at the crossroads of the geopolitical interests of the great powers, adapting to this new reality was not only a military necessity but also a condition for political survival. The Romanian Army had to redefine its doctrine, structure, and professional culture within a relatively short period, under the pressure of regional instability and the approach of a widespread conflict.

The purpose of the article is to analyze how Romanian military thinking was adapted to the requirements of modern warfare in the period leading up to Romania's entry into the First World War. The working hypothesis is that the process of doctrinal modernization was real and coherent at the theoretical level, but incomplete at the practical level, which created a significant gap between conception and execution.
Methodologically, the study uses the analysis of doctrinal documents, military regulations, and specialized works of the era, supplemented by recent historical literature.

Modern War and the Transformation of the Military Paradigm

The period 1912-1916 marks a structural leap in the evolution of European warfare, characterized by the shift from the classical model - based on maneuver, decisive offense, and annihilation battles - to industrialized warfare, attrition, and total mobilization. The Balkan Wars and the early phases of the First World War demonstrated the failure of the Napoleonic paradigm and the need for a profound reconceptualization of military art. This transformation was not only technical but also doctrinal, institutional, and social, affecting the relationship between the state, the army, and society, as well as the strategic role of the army within the modern political system.

Modern war, as it took shape at the beginning of the 20th century, is characterized by the mobilization of national resources on a large scale, the integration of industry into the war effort, and the exponential increase in firepower (Murray, Knox, and Bernstein 1994, 201-230). These elements led to the shift from classic maneuver warfare to other forms of conflict, dominated by firepower, increased range and

accuracy of artillery, fortifications, attrition, and mass mobilization of the population, which required rigorous planning, inter-service coordination, efficient logistics, and a systemic approach to conflict (Doughty 2005, 3-28).

Carl von Clausewitz defined war as an "act of violence intended to compel the opponent to fulfill our will" (Von Clausewitz 1982, 75), yet this statement should not be detached from the fundamental distinction the author makes between "absolute war" - a theoretical construct resulting from the internal logic of escalating violence - and "real war," which is inevitably limited by political, moral, social, and material factors. In Clausewitz's view, war never unfolds in its "pure" form, as it is constantly moderated by what he calls the "friction" of reality: imperfect information, the resistance of the material environment, human weaknesses, and political constraints.

In 1914, however, the European military elites - especially those of the major continental powers - acted in a way that suggests a selective and simplified adaptation of Clausewitzian theory, treating war as an instrument capable of producing a rapid total strategic decision. Operational planning was dominated by the assumption of a short and decisive campaign, in which the political will of the adversary was to be defeated by a single major fight. This vision largely ignored the ability of modern industrial economies to sustain a prolonged conflict, the role of organized defense (fortifications, automatic fire, railway networks), and the effects of total mobilization of societies.

Consequently, rather than representing the realistic application of Clausewitz's theory, the strategic behavior of decision-makers in 1914 reflected more a form of "absolutization" of war, in which political and material limits were systematically underestimated. The war that followed did not confirm the possibility of absolute war; on the contrary, it precisely demonstrated the validity of Clausewitz's warning: modern conflict is profoundly conditioned by the social, economic, and technological structures of the era and cannot be reduced to a mere confrontation of military wills.

The same logic can be found in Romania's strategic planning during the period 1914–1916. Although the material constraints of the Romanian state were much more severe than those of the great powers, the General Staff built the dominant operational options around the hypothesis of a relatively short war, fought under favorable conditions, which would allow the rapid achievement of the fundamental political objective - the unification of the provinces predominantly inhabited by Romanians. The 1916 campaign plan foresaw an initial offensive in Transylvania aimed at producing a quick decision before the Central Powers could concentrate superior forces on the Romanian front. This option reflected not only a disregard for the lessons of the war already underway in the West, but also a selective adaptation of those lessons to Romania's political and moral constraints: the Romanian state could not afford a long-term war of attrition, neither economically nor socially. In this sense, the hypothesis of the 'short war' was not a purely military misperception, but a strategic necessity imposed by the structural disparity between national objectives

and available resources. The failure of this hypothesis in the autumn of 1916 does not disprove the initial rationality of the choice, but highlights the structural, deeply Clausewitzian, tension between the political goals of the state and the military means actually available to achieve them.

The German military historian Hans Delbrück highlighted a fundamental conceptual distinction between two ideal types of strategy: "Niederwerfungsstrategie" - the strategy of annihilation, aimed at achieving a quick victory by destroying the opponent's main forces - and "Ermattungsstrategie" - the strategy of attrition, which seeks to gradually weaken the enemy's material, moral, and political capacity until the point where they can no longer sustain the conflict (Delbrück 1920, 14–18). This differentiation does not denote mere tactical options, but actually reflects different ways of relating the available military means, the structure of the state, and the pursued political objectives.

The experience of the First World War demonstrated the largely illusory nature of adopting a strategy of annihilation under conditions of industrialized warfare. Although all the major powers entered the conflict in 1914 with plans conceived according to the logic of the "Niederwerfungsstrategie" – either in the form of an initial decisive strike or a rapid strategic maneuver intended to cause the opponent's collapse – the technological and social reality of modern warfare imposed a progressive, but inevitable, transition to the logic of attrition. The defensive superiority provided by machine guns, heavy artillery, and fortification systems, the capacity of industrial economies to generate long-term resources, and the massive mobilization of populations blocked the possibility of achieving a quick decision.

In this context, the war transformed from a decision-oriented confrontation into a process of mutual exhaustion, in which the strategic objective was no longer the immediate destruction of the opposing army, but the gradual erosion of its human, economic, and political potential. The transition to an "Ermattungsstrategie" was not the result of a conscious doctrinal choice, but the structural consequence of the interaction between technology, social organization, and political objectives in a total conflict. Thus, the Great War did not represent the triumph of a war of attrition strategy in a normative sense, but demonstrated that, under conditions of industrial innovations, the strategy of annihilation becomes the exception, while the war of attrition strategy tends to become the rule.

The Romanian planning prior to entering the war, reflected in the documents of the General Staff from 1914–1916, was structured around the hypothesis of a rapid offensive operation in Transylvania, aimed at causing the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian deployment and enforcing a favorable political solution in a short time. This concept assumed both limiting the duration of the conflict and avoiding a prolonged war of attrition, for which the Romanian state lacked both industrial resources and the necessary logistical infrastructure. However, the operational

reality of the 1916 campaign disproved these assumptions. The Austro-Hungarian resistance, followed by the decisive intervention of German and Bulgarian forces, the material and organizational superiority of the Central Powers, as well as the structural vulnerability of the Romanian mobilization and supply system, quickly turned the war into a process of asymmetric attrition. Romania was forced to abandon the logic of rapid decision-making and accept a war of exhaustion, in which the strategic objective was no longer immediate victory, but the survival of the state and the preservation of a viable military core.

British General John Frederick Charles Fuller is among the first military theorists who systematically understood the profound implications of industrialization on warfare, surpassing both the classical paradigm of mass confrontation and the mere quantitative accumulation of technical means. In his view, industrial modernity not only changed the scale of conflict but also its very logic: technology, firepower, and mobility could not be treated as separate elements but had to be integrated into a coherent operational doctrine capable of producing decisive effects on the adversary (Fuller 1926, 56–60).

Fuller emphasized that military efficiency does not result from numerical superiority, but from the ability to coordinate technical means into a functional whole – which he conceptualized as a "weapons system," in which tanks, aviation, artillery, and communications are integrated into a unified mechanism of maneuver, fire, and command. The goal was not the total physical destruction of enemy forces, but the structural disruption of their capacity to fight, by simultaneously striking command centers, logistics, and morale.

Fuller's ideas, however, in the context of the First World War, were more anticipatory than applicable, being formulated at a time when most armies – including the Romanian one – were still in a transition phase between the mass warfare paradigm and that of mechanized warfare. In Romania's case, the structural limitations of the economy, the absence of a defense industry capable of supporting the production of modern equipment, and the almost exclusive dependence on imports made it impossible to materialize a doctrine based on the integration of technology and mobility in the manner proposed by Fuller.

In the 1916 campaign, the Romanian army remained, more out of necessity than doctrinal choice, anchored in a combat model dominated by infantry and artillery, where mobility was limited, and the coordination of fire and maneuvers was carried out mostly through traditional means. Even the reorganization process in 1917, carried out with French support, primarily aimed at increasing the density and efficiency of artillery fire, improving training and command, rather than a structural transformation of a mechanized type.

Thus, the Romanian case indirectly confirms Fuller's theory: modern war is not just a matter of doctrine, but also of material capacity and industrial development. The absence of the necessary economic and technological conditions profoundly limited Romania's ability to adopt advanced forms of fire and mobility integration, keeping the conflict within the realm of attrition warfare dominated by the consumption of human and material resources, rather than decisive technological maneuvering as anticipated by modern military theorists.

The historian and military theorist B.H. Liddell Hart formulated one of the most influential critiques of the dominant paradigm of the frontal "decisive battle," showing that the obsession with confrontation with the main forces of the adversary leads, under conditions of industrialized warfare, not to a quick decision, but to mutual attrition and disproportionate losses. In opposition to this tradition, he advocated what he called the "indirect approach," in which the goal is not the immediate destruction of the enemy army, but the disruption of its strategic system by striking its vulnerable points - logistical, psychological, political, or operational - that sustain its capacity to fight (Liddell-Hart 1941, 5–12).

From this perspective, the strategic decision does not result from a buildup of casualties on the battlefield, but from the collapse of cohesion and the functioning of the opposing force. Liddell Hart emphasized that maneuver, surprise, and moral disruption are often more effective than numerical superiority or firepower intensity, especially in a context where technology favors defense and makes frontal assaults extremely costly.

The experience of 1914 dramatically confirmed his warnings: the major European powers went to war driven by the desire for a quick, decisive battle, launching massive frontal offensives that caused enormous losses without producing proportionate strategic results. The indirect approach was largely ignored in the initial phase of the conflict, perceived either as too subtle or as incompatible with the political imperatives of total mobilization. Only the prolonged experience of trench warfare and the exhaustion of the combatant societies created the conditions for a reassessment of this concept and for the adoption, in adapted forms, of strategies focused on maneuver, displacement, and operational integration during the interwar period and in World War II.

Thus, Liddell Hart's thinking can be interpreted not merely as a retrospective critique of the Great War, but as an attempt to extract a structural lesson from it: in the modern era, strategic effectiveness does not lie in the ability to endure the greatest losses, but in the ability to avoid unnecessary confrontation and to turn relative superiority into strategic effect through indirect means.

The Romanian case fits into this general pattern, but also nuances it: the 1916 campaign plan, focused on a direct offensive in Transylvania, involved obtaining a political decision through a frontal advance and territorial occupation, without,

however, having the means necessary to produce a real strategic displacement of the adversary. In the absence of deep operational maneuver capability and relevant mechanized or aerial means, the "indirect approach" in Liddell Hart's sense was not practically available to the Romanian army.

The English military historian John Keegan made a decisive contribution to broadening the scope of military history by introducing a cultural perspective on war, showing that the concrete way in which states wage war is not determined solely by strategic calculations or technological constraints, but profoundly reflects the dominant values, political institutions, and social structure of the combatant communities. In this view, war is not merely a military event, but an expression of the political and social culture of the era, and its forms—from the organization of the army and style of command to the relationship between officers and soldiers or the acceptance of casualties—are shaped by collective representations of authority, discipline, honor, and sacrifice (Keegan 1993, 3–10).

Keegan challenged the universality of abstract strategic models, suggesting that the same technologies and the same material constraints can produce different military practices depending on the cultural context. Armies are not mere technical instruments of the state, but social institutions embedded in a particular type of political and moral order. Therefore, to understand a state's military behavior, it is necessary to analyze not only its plans and doctrines, but also the way that society conceives of authority, legitimate violence, and the relationship between the individual and the collective.

Applied to the First World War, this perspective explains why states facing similar problems reacted differently: some quickly accepted the logic of total mobilization and mass sacrifice, while others showed resistance, ambivalence, or structural difficulties in sustaining a long-term conflict. Thus, Keegan's analysis does not replace strategic or economic explanations, but complements them, providing a framework for understanding the symbolic and social dimensions of modern war.

In the case of Romania, this vision explains many of the constraints and peculiarities of the military campaigns carried out. The Romanian army operated in a predominantly agrarian society, with rapid mobilization imposed on a population unaccustomed to modern military discipline and with limited experience in industrialized warfare. The traditional relationship between the state and the peasants, as well as the army's hierarchical structure, influenced the way how troops responded to orders, losses, and prolonged effort. For example, senior military officers were often forced to adapt offensive-defensive strategies locally, taking into account the soldiers' motivation and resilience, rather than relying solely on abstract doctrinal aspects.

This cultural-military interpretation also explains why the Romanian army faced significant difficulties in applying modern maneuver doctrines or integrating fire

and mobility, as proposed by Western theorists such as Fuller or Liddell Hart. Moral resistance, familiarity with the terrain, community ties, and perceptions of authority determined the concrete way in which troops were deployed and engaged in combat, making the adaptation to attrition warfare and modern forms of conflict gradual and conditioned by social factors.

Thus, Keegan's perspective provides an interpretative key for understanding the particularity of the Romanian experience: the war was not just a confrontation between military forces, but also an expression of social structures and cultural values, which directly shaped the army's behavior on the battlefield and the state's ability to sustain a long conflict.

The characteristics of modern warfare in the period 1912-1916 are reflected in the experience of the Romanian army, in a context with specific material and structural constraints, among which:

- industrialization – the production of heavy weapons and ammunition made prolonged war possible in the major European armies. Romania, with a limited military industry and dependent on imports, had to prioritize the quantity and quality of available weapons, focusing on artillery and machine guns, as well as on modernizing existing arms;
- the supremacy of fire over maneuver – offensive doctrines borrowed from French and German schools clashed with tactical realities: the power of artillery and machine guns on the fronts in Transylvania and Dobrogea limited the possibilities for rapid maneuver, requiring the adaptation of Romanian strategies and the concentrated use of fire in support of infantry, especially during retreats and defensive positions in 1916;
- the continuous front and defense – the experience of the battles in 1916 demonstrated the necessity of adopting a solid defensive line, with improvised fortifications and trenches, to protect troops and conserve combat strength. These measures practically reflected the transition to a war of attrition, imposed by the material and numerical superiority of the Central Powers;
- total mobilization – Romania was forced to integrate its economy and society into the war effort: general mobilization, recruitment, redistribution of resources, and the involvement of the civilian population in logistical support highlighted that military success depended not only on the army's capability, but on the entire social and economic structure of the state.

The Romanian army operated in a transitional environment, where the characteristics of modern warfare were only partially evident. Doctrinal and operational adaptation was determined both by external influences (the French, German, and British schools) and by internal constraints: industrial, social, and logistical, reflecting a complex process of synthesis between the theoretical ideals of modern warfare and the pragmatic realities of a state on the periphery of industrialized military Europe.

The transformation of the military paradigm in the period 1912–1916 marks the shift from maneuver warfare, characterized by mobility and rapid offensives, to

industrialized war of attrition, defined by the supremacy of firepower, fortified defensive lines, and the total mobilization of state resources. This change was not only technological but also structural and doctrinal: military success increasingly depended on the integration of industrial production, logistical infrastructure, and society's capacity to sustain a prolonged conflict.

The Romanian experience shows that the transition to industrialized war of attrition cannot be achieved automatically through doctrine or ambitious plans, but requires a complex adjustment between resources, organization, and the social, economic, and technological realities of the involved state. Romania, as a medium-sized state, was forced to learn this lesson in the midst of the conflict, adapting its strategies to the limits imposed by the modern context of war.

Doctrinal Influences on the Romanian Army

In doctrinal terms, the major European armies responded differently to the challenges posed by the technological and social transformations of modern warfare. The French school, influenced by the revolutionary and Napoleonic tradition, emphasized rapid offense, troop morale, and the decisive role of strong attacks, highlighting the importance of willpower and the spirit of sacrifice. The German army, on the other hand, developed a doctrine focused on rigorous planning, discipline, and the complex coordination of units, integrating logistics, artillery, and communications into a coherent command and control system. The British experience, derived from colonial conflicts and industrial war, highlighted the importance of inter-service cooperation and combined maneuver, anticipating the systematic integration of infantry, artillery, and air power to achieve maximum strategic effect.

Romania, situated at the intersection of these doctrinal influences and undergoing a rapid process of army modernization, adopted a hybrid model that combined the principles of each tradition in an effort to adapt to material and social realities. From the French tradition, it inherited the emphasis on offense and morale, visible in the 1916 campaign plans; from the German school, Romania learned the importance of detailed planning, strict discipline, and coordination of units across the entire operational area; while from the British experience, it began experimenting with inter-service cooperation and the use of artillery in direct support of the infantry, even under limited infrastructure and resource conditions.

This doctrinal synthesis, however, was not merely an act of imitation, but a necessary process of adaptation: Romania had to align its strategic ambitions with the real constraints of mobilization, infrastructure, industrialization, and social structures. The result was a pragmatic, flexible doctrine that combined the principles of European theorists with the specific conditions of warfare on the Romanian front, reflecting both external influences and lessons imposed by local operational experience.

Before 1916, Romanian military thinking was strongly influenced by the French model, both through the training of officers in Western military schools and through the translation and adaptation of instruction manuals (Torrey 1998, 21–27). The concept of decisive offensive, the role of troop morale, and the initiative of the commander were central elements (Doughty 2005, 3–28). German influence introduced an emphasis on rigorous planning and organizational discipline, while British experience contributed to the development of cooperation between branches and the integration of logistics into planning (Doughty 2005, 3–28). Romania sought to synthesize these influences into its own doctrine, adapted to its geographical, demographic, and economic conditions.

The experience of mobilizing and deploying troops during the Second Balkan War (1913) prompted the Romanian General Staff to pay increased attention to issues regarding mobilization, railway transport, and strategic concentration. These concerns are reflected in the orders and instructions issued starting in 1914 regarding the revision of mobilization and army concentration plans in the event of a general European conflict. A significant document in this regard is the "Instruction on General Mobilization," revised in 1914, which emphasized the need to reduce concentration times and ensure closer coordination between the General Staff, the Railway Directorate, and territorial commands (RNA, General Staff fund, file 12/1914).

At the same time, the experience of the Balkan Wars highlighted the limitations of this model in a context dominated by artillery fire and improvised fortifications. This led to a partial reevaluation of the doctrine, with emphasis on inter-branch cooperation, the role of logistics, and the need for superior technical training.
Romania's participation in the Second Balkan War (1913) constituted the army's first practical experience in a regional conflict of a modern nature, but of relatively limited scale (Hall 2000, 135–170). The military operations carried out allowed for testing elements of mobilization, maneuver, and coordination between infantry, artillery, and cavalry units, but the absence of major confrontations with a well-equipped army created an overly optimistic perception of the Romanian forces' actual combat capability (Buzatu 2003, 289–300).

The limited experience from the Balkan war led to an overestimation of operational capabilities and, consequently, to an insufficiently critical adjustment of Romanian military doctrine, given that the approaching European conflict was going to be much more complex, with greater intensity and superior combat technology.
Thus, the confrontation in 1913 had a dual outcome: on the one hand, it provided a useful framework for testing command structures and for becoming familiar with rapid mobilization; on the other hand, the absence of major strategic challenges contributed to a mistaken perception of the army's actual level of readiness, which influenced doctrinal decisions and operational planning in the period leading up to the First World War (Popescu 2008, 145–148).

The documents of the General Staff show that the logistical and organizational lessons learned from the 1913 campaign were officially recognized, but their effective implementation remained partial and incomplete (RNMA, General Staff collection, 1913 operational files). Reports and orders emphasized the need to strengthen supply, ensure rapid mobilization, and coordinate units on the battlefield, but the practical implementation of these recommendations was limited by material constraints, lack of experience in modern logistical fields, and administrative gaps.

This discrepancy between doctrinal recognition and actual implementation, combined with the overly optimistic perception generated by the absence of major confrontations in the Second Balkan War (Popescu 2008, 145–148). The result was an exaggerated optimism in assessing the army's real combat capacity, which influenced planning and training for the period 1914-1916. The orders and dispositions of the General Staff from this period reflect both an awareness of the need for logistical reforms and the difficulty of implementing them in practice. Thus, the Balkan experience provided two lessons: on the one hand, highlighting weaknesses and the need for modernization; on the other hand, an optimism that led to insufficient doctrinal adjustments in anticipation of a large-scale European conflict.

Between 1914 and 1916, the General Staff successively developed and revised operational plans in the event of Romania entering the war, with the Austro-Hungarian Empire as the main adversary. These plans reflect the tension between the classical paradigm of decisive offensive and the realities of modern warfare.
The operational plan from 1914 provided for a rapid concentration of forces in Transylvania and the launch of an offensive aimed at achieving a quick political and military decision. The emphasis was on:

- strategic offensive;
- breaching the enemy front along the Brașov-Sibiu and Orșova-Timișoara directions;
- exploiting the morale of the troops and the support of the Romanian population in Transylvania (NRA, Great General Staff fund, file 45/1914).

The review of the operations plan, carried out in 1915, marked an important stage in adapting the doctrine of the Romanian Army to the realities of modern conflicts. The new documents introduce a series of strategic and operational elements that reflect both the experience gained in previous campaigns and European doctrinal influences. Firstly, there is a clear focus on the southern flank, particularly the area of Bulgaria, where a potential military threat was anticipated. Secondly, the plan recognizes the importance of heavy artillery and operational reserves, emphasizing the need to concentrate and efficiently use fire support in the conduct of operations. Thirdly, the review introduces for the first-time explicit references to cooperation with allies, especially Russia and France, highlighting the role of alliances in strategic planning and in coordinating joint operations (NRA, Great General Staff fund, file 33/1915).

These changes show a clear attempt by the General Staff to address the gaps in previous plans and to integrate into doctrine both the logistical and tactical lessons learned from the Balkan experience, as well as modern combined warfare concepts, anticipating the need for a war on multiple fronts with complex industrial resources (Popescu 2008, 152–156).

The August 1916 campaign plan, approved by order of the General Headquarters, essentially maintains the fundamental offensive structure of the operations. According to this plan, three armies were to advance into Transylvania, while the 3rd Army had the role of covering the southern border, preparing for possible reactions against aggression from Bulgaria. This configuration highlights the persistence of the maneuver warfare paradigm in Romanian strategic thinking, despite the lessons learned from the European war, where the experience of the Western and Eastern fronts clearly demonstrated the attritional and defensive nature of the conflict (NRA, General Headquarters fund, file 1/1916).

Maintaining the offensive plan reflects both the tension between political ambitions and the army's material capacities and the difficulty of quickly adapting traditional doctrine to the realities of industrialized warfare. Additionally, the plan highlights the challenges posed by logistical limitations, insufficiently experienced mobilization, and coordination with allies, emphasizing the gap between the theoretical conception of strategy and its practical application in the field (Boia 2010, 120–125). Thus, the 1916 campaign remains an example of the confrontation between the traditional offensive paradigm and the demands of modern warfare, which would test the Romanian Army's ability to adapt.

The analysis of the operational orders issued in the summer and autumn of 1916 reveals several conceptual and doctrinal deficiencies in the planning of Romanian military operations. Firstly, there is an overestimation of the ability to quickly break through the enemy front, which still reflected fidelity to the traditional maneuver warfare paradigm. Secondly, the battle order underestimated the reaction and coordination capabilities of the Central Powers, neglecting the experiences of the Western and Eastern fronts regarding the speed and efficiency of enemy defensive systems. Thirdly, there is insufficient integration of heavy artillery and modern military equipment, which limited the firepower and operational efficiency of the troops.

An example is the Order of Operations No. 1 of August 1916, which emphasizes 'immediate advance' and 'maintaining the offensive spirit,' using conceptual language characteristic of the classical paradigm. In reality, however, the context of industrialized warfare required a more nuanced approach, based on caution, consolidation, and inter-service cooperation, through coordinated use of infantry, artillery, and cavalry, supported by efficient logistics and communications (NRA, General Headquarters fonds, file 5/1916).

This discrepancy between the traditional offensive doctrine and modern operational realities highlights the Romanian Army's difficulty in adapting strategic planning to a war characterized by prolonged attrition and technical-tactical complexity, anticipating the major challenges of the Transylvanian campaign and the southern front.
This discrepancy between doctrinal language, focused on offense and an aggressive spirit, and operational reality, dominated by enemy resistance and logistical complexity, largely explains the difficulties faced by the Romanian army in the 1916 campaign. Strategic ambitions, supported by the offensive plans developed in August 1916, encountered the concrete limits of mobilization, the insufficient integration of heavy artillery, and the actual reaction capacity of the Central Powers. The result was a rapid transformation of an initially ambitious offensive into a strategic retreat, which required an urgent revision of operational plans and a gradual adaptation of Romanian doctrine to the realities of industrialized warfare.

Romania's 1916 campaign plan still reflected the traditional paradigm of a rapid offensive through Transylvania, designed to achieve a strategic decision through the concentrated and surprising advance of troops. However, this concept underestimated the reaction capability of the Central Powers, as well as the logistical difficulties inherent in a state with limited infrastructure and reduced industrial resources. In practice, theoretical plans quickly confronted the realities of modern warfare: deficiencies in heavy artillery, insufficient ammunition, lack of efficient transportation, and the vulnerability of flanks made it impossible to sustain the initial offensive momentum.

The campaign of 1916 highlighted the structural limits of the Romanian adaptation to industrialized conflict. The planned offensive gradually turned into a crisis defense, characterized by retreats, rapid reorganization of units, and the concentration of effort on defending critical points. Experience showed that, without adequate heavy artillery, stable logistical support, and flank protection, traditional offensive maneuver concepts could not be successfully applied, and Romanian troops were forced to adapt to a war of attrition, in which conserving resources and resilience of the defensive system became strategic priorities.

The gap between doctrine and reality

The period 1912-1916 is marked in the evolution of the Romanian Army by a structural tension between the doctrinal continuity inherited from the 19th century and the profound transformations of modern warfare. Although the Romanian military elites were informed about European doctrinal developments and the lessons of contemporary wars, the effective adaptation of doctrine to operational realities occurred slowly, fragmentarily, and often inconsistently (Popescu 2008, 21–24).

Romania's participation in the Second Balkan War (1913) provided the army with its first experience in a modern, yet limited-intensity, regional conflict. The absence

of major confrontations with a well-equipped opponent led to an overly optimistic perception of the level of preparedness and actual combat capability, which reduced the pressure for profound doctrinal reforms. Consequently, although the reports of the General Staff formally acknowledged the logistical and organizational lessons of the campaign, their implementation was only partial, constrained by material limitations, institutional inertia, and the persistence of an operational culture focused on offensive operations.

The review of the 1915 plans introduced new and relevant elements – concern for the southern flank, recognition of the role of heavy artillery, operational reserves, and cooperation with allies – but these adjustments did not fundamentally change the dominant paradigm. Strategic thinking remained anchored in an offensive-maneuver concept, suitable for the rapid conflicts of the 19th century, but increasingly inadequate for the industrialized war of attrition that was already taking place on the Western and Eastern fronts (MRA, Order of the General Staff No. 22/1915).

This persistence is evident in the campaign plan of August 1916, which provided for a massive offensive in Transylvania, defensively covered by the 3rd Army in the south. The plan reflected a disproportionate confidence in the ability for rapid penetration and in the enemy's weak response, underestimating both the resilience of the Central Powers' defensive systems and the logistical complexity of supporting an offensive on multiple fronts (MRA, Order of the Great General Staff no. 1/1916).

The analysis of the operational orders from the summer and autumn of 1916 confirms this gap. The language used – 'unhindered advance,' 'maintaining the offensive spirit' – belongs to a conceptual universe that favors will, momentum, and initiative, while the reality of war demanded caution, consolidation, inter-service cooperation, and careful management of resources (MRA, Operations Order no. 1/August 1916). Overestimating one's own offensive capability, underestimating the enemy's reaction, and the insufficient integration of heavy artillery and modern means contributed decisively to the vulnerability of the Romanian disposition.

In this regard, the gap between doctrine and reality was not merely technical or logistical, but deeply conceptual: between a military culture built on the paradigm of maneuver warfare and a strategic environment dominated by attrition, industrialization, and the interdependence of arms, economy, and alliances. This discrepancy largely explains the difficulties of the 1916 campaign and the rapid transformation of an ambitious offensive into a strategic retreat (Boia 2010, 120–125).

Although conceptual modernization was visible in official documents and military discourse, the institutional capacity for implementation was limited by structural factors – insufficient infrastructure, a poorly developed military industry, deficiencies in the mobilization system, and an inadequately trained command corps – with the Romanian state being unable to sustain a long-term conflict (Hitchins 1994, 215-230).

Dependence on imports for weapons and ammunition constituted a major strategic vulnerability (Murgescu 2010, 123-140).

After 1918, several Romanian generals published works in which they pointed out the structural deficiencies of the army as early as the 1912–1915 period and emphasized the state's inability to eliminate them before the outbreak of the Great War. Among others, this category includes Generals Alexandru Iarca and Alexandru Averescu, whose analyses highlight both the structural limitations of the army and the tensions between strategic requirements and available economic resources.

In the volume "My Memoir", General Alexandru Iarca offers an interpretation of the state of the Romanian army in the years preceding the war using structural explanations. He shows that deficiencies in armaments, ammunition, and logistical organization cannot be attributed solely to leadership errors but must be related to the economic limits of the Romanian state, characterized by an underdeveloped industry and dependence on imports for military equipment. The experience of the Balkan Wars did not create the army's shortages, but only highlighted them, and the short period before the outbreak of the world conflict did not allow for a substantial correction of these deficiencies (Iarca 1922, 199-232). General Iarca's interpretation shows that, from this perspective, the army's deficiencies arise as the result of a gap between Romania's strategic ambitions and its real economic resources, rather than as the effect of deliberate negligence by political or military leadership.

In the first chapters of the work "Responsibilities," General Alexandru Averescu evaluates the readiness of the Romanian army prior to the 1916 campaign, identifying a series of structural and administrative deficiencies. He emphasizes the insufficiency of modern weaponry, the lack of reserves of ammunition and equipment, as well as the logistical organization, which he considers incompatible with the demands of industrial warfare. In his analysis, these shortcomings are linked to delays in the adoption of equipment programs and to the tendency of the political factor to subordinate the needs of the army to other budgetary priorities. Averescu insists that the experience of the Balkan Wars had already demonstrated the army's vulnerabilities, but the conclusions drawn from them were not sufficiently utilized in the following years (Averescu 1921, 15-42). From this perspective, the 1916 campaign does not appear as the result of a strategic accident, but as an expression of the accumulation of previous deficiencies, caused by the lack of a consistent military policy and the mismatch between strategic ambitions and the available material resources.

Financial assessments made after the war indicate serious structural limits in Romania's budgetary capacity. Thus, in 1922, the Romanian economist and banker of the interwar period, Aristide Blank, pointed out that, to support the military effort, Romania had contracted loans of approximately 1.6 billion gold francs from the British and French governments. This amount becomes all the more significant when compared to the roughly 2.1 billion gold francs needed to modernize the

Romanian state in the half-century preceding the war, funding that came largely from Germany and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The ratio between these values highlights the disproportion between the state's economic resources and the demands imposed by the world conflict. From this perspective, the criticisms later expressed in the political and memorialist spheres appear insufficiently grounded. For example, General Alexandru Averescu's reproaches regarding the army's inadequate material preparation ignore the real constraints of public finances. The issue was not the diversion of resources or a lack of political will, but rather the modest size of the Romanian state's economic base, which made it impossible to support armament compatible with the standards of the Great War. The costs of such modernization would have exceeded Romania's annual budget in 1914–1915 several times over, which explains the material gaps without resorting to accusations or blame (Cristescu 2019, 23).

Doctrinal modernization was accompanied by institutional resistance driven by professional traditions and the prestige of classical forms of warfare (Huntington 1957, 59–85). This cultural tension limited the pace and depth of change. The period of neutrality was used for doctrinal and organizational adjustments, yet archival documents reveal significant delays in the areas of mobilization and equipment (NRA, Ministry of War records, file 1914-1916).
Thus, the period 1912-1916 can be interpreted not only as a time of military preparation but also as one of latent doctrinal crisis, during which the Romanian Army attempted to transition from a 19th-century war model to the realities of the 20th century - an incomplete transition, rushed by events, and costly, in 1916.

Conclusions

The process of modernizing Romanian military thinking in the period 1912-1916 was real and aimed at becoming integrated into the European trends of the era. However, this modernization remained predominantly conceptual, not being supported by a corresponding institutional and material transformation. The result was an army that 'thought in a modern manner' but still operated within a traditional structural framework.

The Romanian Army entered the war with a modern doctrine, but with an institutional structure that was insufficiently adapted, which explains the initial difficulties in 1916 and the need for subsequent accelerated adaptation. This tension between concept and reality constitutes one of the explanations for the evolution of the Romanian Army in the First World War and provides a useful interpretive framework for understanding the processes of military modernization in small and medium-sized states.

The period 1912-1916 represents a turning point in the evolution of Romanian military thinking, situated between the doctrinal continuity of the 19th century and

the emergence of a new type of war characterized by industrialization, attrition, and systemic interdependence among the situation on the front, economy, and politics. The analysis of doctrinal documents, operational planning, and the conceptual language used by Romanian military elites indicates that the Romanian Army was not isolated from major European debates on the transformation of warfare, but the process of assimilating these debates was fragmentary, selective, and structurally incomplete.

The experience of the Second Balkan War acted as an ambiguous catalyst: on one hand, it provided an initial encounter with a modern type of regional conflict; on the other hand, due to its limited nature, it created a mistaken perception when assessing actual combat capability. This overestimation of one's own effectiveness reduced the pressure for radical doctrinal reforms and favored the maintenance of an offensive-maneuver paradigm in a strategic context that was rapidly becoming incompatible with it.

The doctrinal revisions and successive planning during the 1914-1915 period reflect a gradual awareness of the changing nature of war: explicit references appear to the decisive role of heavy artillery, the importance of operational reserves and logistics, as well as the necessity of cooperation at the allied level. However, these adjustments were more complementary than transformative in nature. They did not alter the conceptual core of the doctrine, which remained centered on the idea of quickly breaking through the front and the primacy of the offensive.

The campaign plan from August 1916 and subsequent operational orders confirmed the persistence of this strategic culture. The normative language of the documents emphasizes will, momentum, and initiative, while the structural dimensions of industrialized warfare – fire density, the resilience of defensive systems, logistical constraints, and strategic timing – are underestimated or treated marginally. This dissonance between doctrinal language and operational reality explains not only the tactical difficulties of the 1916 campaign but also the rapid transformation of an ambitious offensive into a strategic retreat.

Therefore, the modernization of Romanian military thinking in the period 1912-1916 can be characterized not as a failed process, but as one that had begun but remained unfinished, accelerated by the entry into war and later continued under the constraints of front-line realities. This perspective allows for a more nuanced understanding of the evolution of the Romanian Army: not as a result of incompetence, but as an institution undergoing a difficult process of adaptation to a major historical rupture in the way war is conducted.

The modernization of Romanian military thinking between 1912 and 1916 cannot be evaluated in narrow terms of success or failure, but must be understood as a constrained historical structural process, marked by internal tensions and doctrinal contradictions, typical of middle powers caught between imported strategic models and their own institutional limitations. This perspective allows for a reinterpretation

of the Romanian army not as an inert or unworthy institution, but as an actor undergoing a difficult process of adaptation to the fundamental changes brought about by the emergence of industrialized modern warfare.

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