

**HISTORY AND MEMORY  
IN INTELLIGENCE**

## SOVIET RUSSIA AND THE “HYBRID WARFARE” AGAINST ROMANIA BETWEEN WW I AND WW II

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### Abstract

*World War I led to changes both on a European and a global level. Romania is a significant case/example considering the fact that in 1918, after the fall of the multinational empires, it achieved the goal of national unity. In the following years, the Romanian state promoted the peace established then, in order to strengthen its territorial integrity and alliances. The institutions of the national security system worked, since the end of the military actions, to fulfil this strategic objective.*

*Both the army and the national intelligence services were confronted with complex threats. “Great Romania” had, at the time, three neighbouring countries with an obvious revisionist foreign policy and territorial claims – Hungary, Bulgaria and Soviet Russia. By far the most dangerous enemy (both in terms of force and means) was the Soviet Union which never accepted the territorial losses of the Tsarist Empire and the loss of Bessarabia.*

*Lenin’s Russia and then Stalin’s Soviet Union attempted, in the two decades that separated WW I and WW II, to destabilize the Romanian state through means and methods that echo the modern “hybrid warfare” – from propaganda performed by the communist movement aimed at changing the constitutional order, to various attempts to ignite peasant revolutions (as a pretext for the Red Army intervention), and factory strikes, to an intensive espionage activity.*

*The paper aims to analyse on the one hand the ample subversive actions of the soviet secret services and, on the other, to look at the countermeasures that the Romanian intelligence structures adopted for their annihilation.*

**Keywords:** *Romanian Army, the General Staff, First World War, Soviet Russia, Romanian intelligence services, interwar period, the Department for General State Security, hybrid warfare, Romanian Communist Party.*

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## Introduction

In the European context generated after the end of World War I, Romania, as one of the dynamic actors of the international system created through the peace treaties of 1919-1923 had to face a double challenge, firstly, integrity (from an institutional, administrative and economic point of view), secondly, ensuring a state of security considering the fact that the eastern, western and southern borders were subjected to Soviet, Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism.

Beyond the revolutionary propaganda which excited millions of people from the former Tsarist Empire, the communist leadership adopted an obvious repressive policy once it took over Russia. Denying the people's right to decide their own fate resulted in territorial loss, between 1917-1918, which was perceived by the new political-military elite as an act of "weakness" that had to be fixed as soon as possible.

The Romanian-Soviet relations were extremely tense in the following years, especially considering that the newly formed Soviet Union was considered to be, *de facto*, at war with the Romanian state (after breaking diplomatic relations in January of 1918), only waiting for an appropriate reason to engage in the real military offensive. In this matter, the words of Russian diplomat Maxim M. Litvinov, spoken to communist leader Cristian Racovski in 1920, are eloquent:

"We are now, formally, in a state of war with Romania. We consider that the Romanian troops occupy our territory and, formally, we can cross the Dniester without a declaration of war at any moment." (Constantiniu, 2010, p. 44)

But in order to achieve this strategic objective, a condition had to be respected – the significant weakening of Romania's capacity to react by internal destabilization, terror, assassinations, communist propaganda.

A difficult and extremely tense period follows for the national intelligence structures (firstly the military ones), said services had to, in the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> interwar decade, face an adversary (Russian secret services – VECHEKA, subsequently GPU and OGPU) capable and aggressive, even in the difficult conditions with which communist Russia was against while "applying" hits in the public opinion and not only; for example, the Senate attempt, December of 1920 (Troncotă,

2008, pp. 152-154) or the Tatarbunary uprising, September of 1924. Practically, an adversary that uses (excepting digital mass media propaganda, which didn't exist at the time) every instrument, method, and means presently known as being part of the “hybrid warfare” concept. Moreover, the study details them through the way Russia adapted them in agreement with the way events were carried out. We use the term “hybrid war” because Soviet Russia pursued the weakening of our state, and ultimately occupy a significant part of Romania (the re-occupation of Bessarabia was only one of the first steps) and not only weakening it in order to have certain advantages during negotiations on various topics.

### **Short introduction concerning the “hybrid warfare” concept**

According to Joshua Ball, “hybrid warfare” is a notion referring to an extended area of hostile actions, where military force represents only a fraction and which are executed as part of a flexible strategy, with long-term objectives (Ball, 2019, p. 1).

Hybrid warfare is fundamentally an irregular, asymmetric war, which uses instruments like terrorist and guerrilla tactics, criminal actions, cyber operations, information attacks, put together perfectly so it is capable of affecting the security interests of the targeted state. The idea is affecting various domains/fields that are transformed into strategic ones, like the ones regarding informational operations made possible with support from favourable mass media. The objective is altering and transforming the will and support for engaging in the conflict of the targeted state, population or its leaders (Mattis & Hoffman, 2005).

In Russia’s case, according to the so-called “Gerasimov Doctrine” (2013) and other military theories (Monaghan, 2016), war and peace become notions whose borders keep getting more blurred as time goes on. “Methods of conflict” changed and they imply, nowadays, the massive appeal to political, economic, informational, and humanitarian and other non-military means. These can be supplemented, in particular cases, by using a part of the population (the same ethnic group with the aggressive state) as a true “5<sup>th</sup> column”, or by hidden armed forces.

Hybrid warfares are undeclared by the states, respectively, they are confrontations in which the military component isn't explicitly assumed and isn't, in any given case, singular. In hybrid warfare, not only the military weaknesses are essential, but so are the social ones, so non-military ones, for the one generating the aggression and tries to use them (ethnic tensions, weak and corrupted institutions, sensitive and highly emotional themes concerning that particular public, economical or energetical dependency etc.).

### **“Hybrid warfare” actions initiated by Soviet Russia against Romania at the beginning of the interwar period (1919-1925)**

Based on historical reality and archived documents, we can appreciate the fact that the USSR engaged, between the two World Wars, in a veritable “hybrid war”, with variable intensities over two periods of time. Thereby, in the years 1919 – 1925, when Moscow thought that the “proletarian revolution” could take over Europe, it used considerable human and material resources to weaken capitalist societies and create proper conditions for a Red Army offensive on the continent.

The main target was the Balkan states – Bulgaria, Serbia (including its new provinces, especially Montenegro), Greece and Romania. Otherwise, our country was a strategic obstacle in the path of spreading communism in southern Europe. This is why it “benefited” from special treatment. That is why the Soviet Secret Services used procedures, means, and methods that could be considered as being part of the “hybrid warfare” arsenal, adapted to regional and historical conditions. Between 1919 and 1925, “hard” methods prevail in this complex conflict carried out by Soviet Russia against Romania:

- attempts to arrest the royal family and politico-military elite of the county (1918-1919);
- terrorist attacks with a major emotional impact on society: attacking the Senate (1920);
- massive infiltration of the worker's movement with propaganda agents to disrupt the country's economical life/well-being through strikes, sabotages etc.;

- setting up the Communist Party (May of 1921) to follow the Communist International policy (catchphrase “Romania imperial state that must be dismembered”);

- terrorist attacks in Bessarabia to affect the Romanian authorities credibility.

- maintaining a state of uncertainty in the Romanian society by massive infiltration of communist agitators in the country and the aggressive propaganda promoted by them Bessarabia is viewed by Moscow as being the base to launch “the worker's revolution” in Romania: Soviet secret services create a real “underground army” in the province, ammunition deposits, extended networks of informers etc.

The breakout of the Tatarbunary uprising (southern Bessarabia) in September of 1924 should have been the pretext of a Red Army intervention, to “free” the province and annex it to the newly formed Soviet Union; afterwards, depending on the evolution of those events, the Red Army would have moved forward deep into Romanian territory, towards the Balkan Peninsula, as evidenced by the numerous documents captured by the Romanian secret agents from communist agents infiltrated in the country.

### **The Tatarbunary uprising – the peak of the Russian “hybrid warfare” against Romania in interwar period**

Based on the spread of the communist revolutionary movements in Europe, Soviet Russia started a strong offensive against our country fully using the “hybrid warfare” specific arsenal; this campaign which presumed to send hundreds and hundreds of secret agents of all categories on Romania's territory, as well as great amounts of currency, culminated in intensity in September of 1924. Then, in correlation with the ample communist campaign in Bulgaria and Serbia, triggering the final phase of the hybrid war (armed action to create the pretext of reinforcing the Red Army in Romania) was wanted.

In the middle of August 1924, the secret services informed the army's leadership of Moscow's plan to trigger in the following period a revolution on Romanian territory, through the Balkan wing of the Comintern. The communists' plan of action in Romania in September 1924 (known as the “Koralov Plan”) was approved in an important

meeting of the Russian and Balkan communist leaders under the supervision of Comintern's general secretary, Vasil Kolarov, and it stipulated the initiation of social movements (they were supposed to start between 10-15 September) in several regions of the country (5 of them), accompanying with triggering a campaign of terrorist attacks, assassinations and strikes, backed-up by armed gangs that arrived from Soviet territory (National Archives of Romania, Collection Police General Directorate, File no. 11/1924, f. 1-3).

Interesting to note is that the plan was supposed to be put in practice, initially, without any official involvement from the Soviet Union, another characteristic detail of hybrid war type operations. Hostile actions of the Romanian state only manifested in southern Bessarabia, in the Tatarbunary region, because there were certain factors that enabled such actions, the most important being the support received by the Soviet agents from the Slavs (Russian and Ukrainian) – representing the majority. In this way, with human and financial resources provided by the Communist International, true regional networks of espionage and terrorism, weapons and ammunition deposits, hiding places etc. were set up.

Taking into consideration the premises, on September the 15<sup>th</sup> 1924 the Communist Revolutionary Committee led by Andrei Kliușnikov (nickname Nenin), Soviet political commissar, decided to initiate the armed action. On the night of 15<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> September, the communist agents took over the entire village of Tatarbunary, isolating it by cutting phone wires and shooting local riot cops. Nenin has communicated to the population that it's an undergoing revolution, Bessarabia self-proclaimed as "Moldavian Soviet Republic", and the Red Army entered its territory in order to drive away the Romanian army. Furthermore, he asked the men to arm themselves with the weapons found in secret deposits and fight against the Romanian troops (Moraru, 2008, pp. 229-232). To show their support of the rebellion, on 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> September, the Soviet artillery stationed on the left shore of the Dniester River carried out military shooting manoeuvres, without launching projectiles on Romanian soil: Soviet Russia didn't want to start the war unless the certainty that Romania was unable to

respond in an efficient way existed – a method that can be easily placed under the philosophy of “hybrid warfare”.

Detachments of communist agents (20-30 people) take, in those days, the control over other villages and townships in southern Bessarabia, intimidating the population. The rebels created here revolutionary committees inspired by the soviet “style”, popular militia units and the Red Guards. The number of insurgents came to around 4.000-6.000, mostly of Ukrainian, Russian, Bulgarian ethnicity etc. The uprising wasn’t supported by the Romanian peasants/villagers and the Bessarabian Germans, which contributed to Russia’s failure.

In order to repress the communist activity, the Romanian Government sent artillery troops and a marine unit, the first clashes taking place on 16<sup>th</sup> September. On the morning of the 18<sup>th</sup> September, the Romanian troops launched an assault on Tatarbunary – the centre of the uprising, subjecting the place to an artillery attack. Unable to stand against the army, Nenin gave up the fight and ordered the retreat of the rebels, aiming to reach Soviet territory. But the Romanian units caught up, annihilating all of them. Andrei Kliușnikov, the main orchestrator of the fight, had the same fate – being killed on 19<sup>th</sup> September in the swamps near the Black Sea. On that same day, the main operations come to an end, the communist action being a disaster: hundreds of Soviet agents and their supporters in Bessarabia being killed or made prisoners (Moraru, 2008, pp. 233-234).

Even though it was fast and efficiently countered by the Romanian army (the communist rebellion only lasting for 4 days), the Tatarbunary action emphasized the great shortages of state institutions, firstly because of insufficient financial and human resources.

### **Rethinking the Russian policy towards Romania: using the “soft” methods of the “hybrid warfare”, 1925 - 1940**

The categorical defeat suffered by the communists in the Balkans led to postponing the process of communizing Europe's south-eastern regions by two decades. Once the Soviet secret services' OGPU (the successor of CHEKA, see more about on Mitrokhin, 2008) actions were efficiently repressed, Moscow refined, in the next decade and a half (1925-1940), the methods and instruments used against our

country, said instruments being part of the hybrid warfare arsenal (the objective still being the one of partially occupying Romania):

- the massive use of secret services to break the informational side of our national security system (registered success in 1926) with the purpose of knowing, as precise as possible, our military capabilities;

- creates many “democratic” organizations, associations, “antifascist fronts” etc. that could act legally and spread communist ideas (in a hidden form) to the working class (the propaganda failed to be spread to the peasantry/rural population);

- reinforces the revisionist anti-Romanian propaganda on an international scale once the USSR was accepted in international organizations;

- creates the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (October 1924) immediately after the Tatarbunary failure to maintain confusion in the population (the capital was at Tirasopol);

- it infiltrates both the left-wing parties (especially Romanian Social Democratic Party) and the far-right parties (Legionary Movement) with communist agitators to derail them from the inside;

- in Bessarabia, extended secret networks are formed in order to support a future attempt to occupy the province by the USSR – obvious success in June of 1940 when the withdrawal of Romanian army and administration was a disaster, resulting in the Soviets capturing the entire military inventory;

- it tries to undermine the country’s external alliances through pressure (and concessions) on some partners from the regional security formations (Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia or Turkey).

Therefore, the means and methods varied and followed different kinds of actions, evolving and gaining amplitude with the help of the internal communist movement which, although was illegal, succeeded to create its own structures in the country. The direct link between the communists and the Soviet secret services and their hybrid warfare type actions are emphasized in the Romanian intelligence structures’ files, where it is specified that: “Members of the Romanian communist movement should not be seen as sons of the Romanian nation, followers of an ordinary political current, but as elements of the enemy

army, working with criminal means and purpose on the country's territory" (Troncotă, 2008, p. 121).

In this way, acting illegally, communist members and sympathizers created, especially in the industrial regions of the country, real networks meant to gather information for Moscow, as well as centres of propaganda and rumour spreading to maintain an uncertain environment in the Romanian society.

Otherwise, in January of 1930, the political bureau of PCUS met to go over INO's external operations (INO was an espionage structure of the main Soviet secret service – OGPU), ordering the organization to gather every possible information from interest zones for the Soviet Union: UK, France and Germany (main western powers), USSR's western neighbours: Poland (main regional enemy), Romania, Finland, the Baltic states and Japan (the great Asian rival power) (Volodarski, 2015, p. 39).

Soviet espionage operations against the state's institutions are, as well, amplified, with the purpose of knowing, in detail, Romania's military capacities, representing a crucial aspect considering that the end goal was triggering military operations. The importance of these secret actions showed itself in June of 1940 when the Soviet commandment further planned to occupy Bessarabia and to dismantling the Romanian army dispatched in the province, starting with the exact knowledge of the Romanian military tactics and its equipment, including weapon categories.

We point out that ever since the middle of the 3<sup>rd</sup> decade, the Romanian-Soviet "secret war" began. Regarding this fact, a known Russian spy, Boris F. Lago-ozarov, arrested in 1925 at Cernauti by the agents of the Department for General State Security (intelligence structure from the Ministry of Interior), confessed in his memoirs, that at Doftana were already imprisoned about 30 persons accused of espionage in the favour of USSR (Moraru, 2008, p. 151) (in the entire country were hundreds of Romanian citizens and foreign people detained for working in favour of the Soviet Union).

Because the archives belonging to the national defence institutions were destroyed during the World War or "wiped clean" of any sensitive information after the communist regime came to power in

Romania in 1948, few aspects are known about the Soviet agents' infiltration in the intelligence structures in the 4<sup>th</sup> interwar decade.

Although, according to the testimonies of several information officers with high functions during the World War, as lieutenant colonel Traian Borcescu (head of the Counterinformation Department in the Special Intelligence Service) we find out that major Tulbure, member of the army's secret service on the anti-communist wing, turned out to be a Soviet agent, according to the documents discovered by Romanian authorities after taking over Odessa (October 1941) (Troncotă, 2004, p. 46); not only he had access to extremely sensitive information regarding espionage networks set up by the Secret Services on Soviet land, but he also managed to infiltrate other "collaborators" through whom he can reinforce his spot and give better information to Moscow.

Even if the Soviet secret services will succeed in other spectacular actions, the most known case being the so-called "Ludovic Mircescu" case (1926-1930) through which the Moscow headquarters find out, in detail, the (Romanian) army deployment plan, with its strategy, weaponry, tactics etc. in the interwar period, registering a great failure.

The efficient policies to counter the far-left danger didn't allow the creation and consolidation, in the country, of a strong communist party to execute, like the parties in the Comintern, Moscow's orders. The resources given to the communist propaganda, diversion, terrorism, espionage actions (thousands of prepared men and millions of dollars – in gold – spent) didn't get communism "set up" in Romania until after 1945 and then only because the Red Army was occupying the country.

## **Conclusions**

Lenin's Russia and then Stalin's USSR tried, in the two interwar decades, to destabilize the Romanian state through different means and methods – from internal propaganda with the help of the communist movement to attempt to spark a rural uprising and workers strike or intensive espionage activity on national territory.

With good reason, the American historian Keith Hitchins said that, for Romania, Soviet Union was “the hereditary enemy, always there, always being a threat to the existence of the country”.

The failure registered in 1924 once the Tatarbunary uprising (Romania) died down and the destruction of the strong communist movement in Bulgaria and Serbia makes Moscow rethink its mode of action (the idea of a military offensive isn't topical anymore), without giving up the strategic objective of taking over the southern part of the continent. For the failure of the plan were responsible, firstly, the national intelligence, military, and civilian structures. Even if it registered some successes in this “hybrid war”, the objective being weakening Romania, by reference to the human and material resources, we can say that Moscow suffered a visible failure. We state this because the re-occupation of Bessarabia by Soviet Russia in June 1940 was made possible due to the international situation in which the Romanian state was in as a consequence of France surrendering, the German-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact signed on August 23, 1939, and of the victorious german offensive in West.

It is proven through this historical step that the hybrid warfare has a very weak spot – it can't have the expected success while the targeted state has a strong society and politico-military elites that understand the danger and react in the proper way, even if initially the balance wasn't tipping in favour of the “victim”.

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