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THE ACTIVITY OF FRENCH LEGATION IN BUCHAREST (1943)

Abstract

During the Second World War, the Romanian-French diplomatic relations were visibly disrupted due to the war alliances then existing, as well as by the conflict events. However, the long-standing friendship between the two states did not support a definitive break of diplomatic relations. Moreover, amid certain crucial moments at that time, the two states made known their mutual affinity and friendship and they assisted each other diplomatically in defending each other's national interests to the greatest extent. In this study, I would therefore focus on the highlights of the Romanian-French diplomatic collaboration throughout the year of 1943 and describe the main events that characterized the activity of the French legation in Bucharest. To the purpose of analyzing this chapter in the Romanian-French relations, I will foremost refer to documents in the CNSAS archive. These documents, reflecting a large part of the Gaullist Resistance activity inside the French legation in Bucharest, are unique and they aid with the understanding of the nature of the Romanian-French relations of those years.

Keywords: *French Resistance; Jacques Truelle; Second War World; French legation; Romania.*

In 1942, France witnessed several military and political challenges, also echoed in the activity of diplomatic missions in Europe. As concluded in one of my previous articles, the French legation in Bucharest during the Second World War was a venue for the development and action of the Gaullist Resistance. Although they were representatives of the Vichy government, the members of the French diplomatic corps in Bucharest committed themselves to defend the interests of the French state by any resources. Many French diplomats even described the Vichy government and Pétain's leadership, especially in its early days, as

a form of compromise with the Germans, in order to defend the state sovereignty.

The year of 1942 was thus marked by the configurations of various French Resistance groups, which would eventually be described as the «Gaullist» Resistance. As Constantin Hiott, the head of the Romanian legation in Vichy, said, ‘those French dissidents who took up arms against the Vichy government and counted on the "Free French" committee established by General de Gaulle can be considered «Gaullists». But there is a biased opinion to be also pinning this attribute onto the French demonstrating anti-German sentiments, hence the word «Gaullist» became synonymous with Germanophobia and Germanophobes. However, between these two definitions, there is an entire range of nuances" (Cristina Preutu, 2022:140).

The actions of the French Resistance continued even after 1942, and the French diplomatic corps tried to maintain a good relationship with the Romanian authorities, recognizing the key to the war alliance with Germany. This study will further the analysis by pointing out to the challenges encountered in the activity of the French legation in 1943, and also to the overall Romanian-French relationship during that same year.

The occupation of the entire French territory by the German troops in November 1942 gave rise to an unparalleled amount of tension within the French legation in Bucharest. At first, the head of the legation intended to burn their archive, thinking that German authorities would confiscate it, but they abandoned this hasty plan (Cristina Preutu, 2021: 296) after discussions with the Romanian authorities. A month later, Jacques Truelle demanded from all the administrative officials to leave their homes and move to the Legation headquarters. Wagner, the Secretary of Legation believed that there would be a possibility that the tense relations between France and Germany at that time to even lead to the sequestration of Marshal Pétain by the authorities, and he would then be unable to act. As a consequence, the members of the French legation were preparing to flee to Turkey, being sure that the German authorities could take repressive measures against them (ACNSAS, 187870, 21:421). However, on December 30, 1942, members of the diplomatic corps were still living in their homes; in addition to that, all of them

were spreading the word that if they were to be recalled to Vichy, they intended to decline and stay in Romania until peace was restored. They even contemplated to request authorization from the Romanian government to reside in Romania as private individuals (CNSAS, 187870, 21:426). In January 1943, the Romanian Intelligence Services reported that the French legation in Bucharest was entirely pro-Gaullist. With François Darlan's disappearance, the thorny problem of French unity was solved. But P. Laval was not well liked by the French either, as many people believed that the lack of unity weakened France at the time (CNSAS, 187870, 21:311). On the other hand, despite all shifts and tensions among the diplomatic corps – doubled over by the fear that at any moment an order from Vichy would call them back – the French minister in Bucharest, Jacques Truelle, pleaded for the unity of the French colony in Romania "for the good of humanity and the salvation of France" (CNSAS, 187870, 22:414). Paradoxical or not, the occupation of the entire French territory by German troops made even the French who still had some confidence of being able to reach an agreement with the Germans, to become skeptical. This attitude led to greater solidarity and cohesion against the Reich (CNSAS, I 187870, 22:340).

The official messages sent by the French diplomats in Romania, especially during the conferences held at the French Institute in Bucharest, were that there was a unity and agreement in the midst of the French community in Bucharest, a sign of being a supporter of the «France United». The official speech of Truelle or other French diplomats' at these conferences was not a militantly pro-Vichy one, but solely emphasized the unity of the French state. Among ambassadors, it was said that "the gathering of all the French forces in the world, especially in the Metropolis, could be done by Giraud, de Gaulle or even Pétain. Regardless of the leader, the French will enlist, whenever possible, under the same flag, to fight for the national unity" (CNSAS, I 187870, 22:304).

We find the same idea in what Jacqueline Hummière, secretary of the French Legation, said in March 1941, "no matter how the international situation changes, the French in Romania will stay an ally to England, since they are confident Marshal Pétain is seeking revenge. In the end, all of French people, regardless of the role they are currently playing, will come together" (ACNSAS, I 938006:9). On June 3, 1943,

after several important Allies victories and following a period of negotiations between de Gaulle and Giraud, the French Committee for National Liberation was created in Algiers under the leadership of Charles de Gaulle. The Committee declared that it held and exercised the true French sovereignty, its purpose being to gradually restore the laws and liberties of the Republic, and then to hand over the power to the future Provisional Government of the French Republic after the war. This structure was recognized by the 3 Allies on August 26: USA, USSR and Great Britain (Ana Maria Stan, 2006: 227–228).

The issue of French Resistance and especially of «Gaullism» became even more tense in the spring of 1943. The French legation in Sweden had already broken off relations with the Vichy government. Henry Spitzmüller raised the issue as such, "the French dissident movement is basically nothing more than the official movement of French patriots, who believe in the rebirth of France and its destiny as the leading nation in Europe. Only those blinded by German pride could say otherwise. The sensible French people are whole heartedly with the patriots who still see quite clearly ahead of them. They should not to be accused of Gaullism or Girondism, as they are just patriots who believe in the eternal France, being impervious to the political ambition in which they are living" (CNSAS, I 187870, 22:319).

Finally, a unity of the Resistance movement was also achieved, through the foundation of the National Council of Resistance, which declared its support for General de Gaulle (Ana Maria Stan, 2006: 228). A strong impetus was given by the demobilization of the Vichy army on November 11, 1942. More and more soldiers and officers from this army joined the Resistance movement and began to fight alongside the Allies. Those radical transformations also posed a problem for the Vichy officials who had been operating clandestinely for various Resistance groups. Regarding the French diplomatic corps in Bucharest, those moments were also decisive for Jacques Truelle, the head of the legation, about whom the 1941 documents of the Romanian Intelligence Services specified that he might have been a member of the Resistance movement.

In fact, the matter was not news for Vichy either, since in January 1942, J. Truelle would have been on the Vichy government's reshuffle list

precisely because of him being suspected of affiliation with the Gaullist movement. He remained in office in the end, but his ambivalent speech would draw specific attention from both the Vichy authorities and the Romanian Intelligence Services. A note written by the SIS in June 1943 said about him, «(...) it is not excluded that Truelle's feelings are for „free France”, but for the moment not everyone carrying out an official mission betrays France. In all his relations with the colony members, Truelle behaves justly, immediately taking the defense of any citizen regardless of nationality»(ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:86). Thus, on June 19, 1943, J. Truelle left Bucharest reporting he was going to Timișoara; nevertheless, on June 28, the legation secretary, Jacqueline D'Hummière, informed the legation officials that Truelle had left Romania for good. Starting with June 29, his duties were taken over by H. Spitzmüller. In reality, Truelle had left Romania to join the Resistance movement. It is worth mentioning here certain important aspects relating to the nature of the Romanian-French relationship. Romanian Intelligence Services, as well as Mihai Antonescu's government, were all aware of J. Truelle's intention to leave his post. A note from the Intelligence Services on June 21, 1943 stated, "Our previous correspondence expresses that both Truelle and the entire political staff in the French legation, although in the service of the Vichy government, harbor Gaullist sentiments and ideals and expect a turn in the course of the war that would restore France to its old status (...). Both J. Truelle and his close collaborators are looking for any opportunity to leave the country and go to Turkey, so they can join the so-called free group of the French people there" (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:101). This is obvious in the latest action of the Romanian government, which was to postpone the official announcement about the departure of J. Truelle and H. Spitzmüller to a week after it had occurred. Even though the German authorities asked I. Antonescu for an explanation about the departure of the two French diplomats, the latter replied that he was not going to deny any visas for the foreign diplomats legally accredited in Romania, therefore he had complied with the rules in the diplomatic realm (Ana Maria Stan, 2006: 235-236). On June 30, 1943, H. Spitzmüller informed the entire French colony that J. Truelle had arrived in Ankara (from Ankara, on July 1, 1943, J. Truelle left for Algiers), where he made himself available to the Combatant France -

from then on, everyone was free to act as they wished, and the legation would facilitate the departure formalities (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:119).

To avoid suspicion, however, he instructed the members of the „Free France” at the Legation to visit only during the official working hours. Also, the meetings of the "Free France” should only be held at the residences of Baron Henry de Bernadette or Jean de Basdevant’s (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:145). Eventually, the headquarters of Free France was moved to Jean de Basdevant’s residence (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:220). H. Spitzmüller, already known by the Romanian Intelligence Services as a Resistance member, received a letter from Adrien Thierry on July 9, 1943, whose content he read to the other Legation members, in which he was encouraged to leave Bucharest and join the Free France forces. After reading the letter, he declared that he would leave Romania at the earliest opportunity, but he would send his wife to Istanbul ahead (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:162).

How did the Romanian political class react to Truelle's departure from Romania? The Peasants saw this departure as an opportunity for Romania to have its real position of the political class towards the Allies made known by a friend of the country, as Truelle was (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:131). Obviously, Truelle's departure was not the only means through which the Allies could learn about the political class’ opinions or the plans of Mihai Antonescu's government. As early as 1942, Romanian delegates had begun contacting the Allies to present Romania's political standpoint and to try to obtain and facilitate good conditions for the future armistice. From a diplomatic perspective, the French legation in Bucharest became a communication channel for Romania with London and Ankara (ACNSAS, I 187870, 22:151), which, in its turn, also helped the French Resistance actions.

The Liberals were also «pleasantly surprised that a political friend of their country managed to show that France turned its back on the German politics to the extent that they were not afraid to face the consequences even if their dissent had been seen as a bold attitude» (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:131). Both Liberals and Peasants were pleased that the two diplomats were able to escape the radar of the German authorities.

The Communists had the same opinion and voiced it through Petre Constantinescu-Iași, «We are not interested in the political fact itself as the former minister of France in Bucharest was a right-wing man. But we are curious to see how the German Gestapo will react to the trick they had played on them.» (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:131).

The senior officials and other intellectuals – known under the code name assigned by the Intelligence Services as «cafenea» (coffee house, n.tr.), who were, as they were described, "more imaginative and irresponsible" had the following stories – «he left in agreement with Mihai Antonescu while defending Romania's interests; he left with the help of the Spanish minister in Bucharest who had been relocated to Ankara; he did not leave the country, but this is a mysterious disappearance which the Gestapo is guilty for» (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:132). It is interesting that the first two theories are not far from the truth, since the attitude of the Romanian government to the questioning by the German authorities regarding Truelle's departure can actually confirm the first one. In addition, Mișu Antonescu was the one to give him the passport, after an order given to Gh. Davidescu, Secretary General of Foreign Affairs, in this regard. Similarly, the transit visa was issued from Bucharest, not Giurgiu, where he had crossed the border (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:135). Plus, the Spanish minister in Bucharest had been a close friend to the French Legation, meeting frequently and having dinners. It is evident that this more or less tacit collaboration between the Romanian authorities and Minister Truelle regarding his departure was previously veiled by Truelle's slightly critical attitude towards the Romanian authorities. In the last two months he complained that he had become a kind of non-grata diplomat, and he was always left behind at ceremonies and audiences (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:134).

Truelle's departure from Romania heightened the tension between the French, German and Romanian authorities in Bucharest; according to an SIS note, a real «war of nerves to completely confuse the Romanian authorities and the Gestapo» sparked. This is how the vigilance of the authorities was tested by the escape attempt of a lower rank official. Then, different members of the legation were asking for 2-3 day permits to travel throughout Romania. At some point, Spitzmüller himself

asked for a 10-day permit he used to travel to Transylvania - in the meantime, false rumors spread that he had fled to Ankara, then to Algiers (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:295).

In August 1943, Paul Morand was appointed minister to replace J. Truelle. His appointment was not happy news for the French diplomatic corps in Bucharest, as they saw him to be just an opportunist, who had shifted from Social Democrats to Nationalists. Other voices believed that Pétain had chosen Paul Morand for this position thanks to his writing profession, quite useful for propaganda (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:222). Other foreign diplomats in Bucharest also did not see the good collaboration of Paul Morand with the members of the French legation likely to happen, since the French diplomatic corps in Bucharest was against Pétain's policy, according to the Spanish ambassador in Bucharest (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:219).

An SIS note from August 1943 recorded the observation that Minister Paul Morand is "resolute to put in place all the carefree French in Romania and to brutally dissolve any attempt from them to act under the cover of the free Gaullist action" (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:253). It seems that the information was not far off the mark, since it was already known in September 1943 that Paul Morand and Henry Spitzmüller were butting heads (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:273). It seems that the tension, as well as the many difficulties encountered in his work, led Paul Morand to request his return to Paris, which happened on 21 October 1943 (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:336). Against all odds, he returned to Bucharest on November 23, 1943, and the activities at the legation headquarters seemed to be running more smoothly (ACNSAS, I 187870, 23:370).

The political and military changes of 1943 were connected with a series of economic changes as well. Henry Spitzmüller, the leader of the Gaullist group inside the French Legation, believed that Germany's economic and financial potential was declining and that they would not be able to face a strategic offensive action that year, especially when the Anglo-Americans were preparing for a major assault in the spring-summer. The same belief came from the fact that the Germans were no longer able to pay the debts contracted on different markets, and in some countries only requisition vouchers were used (CNSAS, I

187870, 22:415). The members of the legation were also paying close attention to the achievements and the economic situation in Romania since the food crisis in France expedited the need to conclude a new economic treaty with Romania. This took place in March 1943 and, this time, the agreement helped France more in the current context than the previous contract of September 1941.

The March 1943 treaty allowed France to use part of the vouchers to buy other goods of Romanian origin, especially agricultural products. Likewise, vouchers used to purchase products other than oil could not be passed on by France to other countries (Ana Maria Stan, 2006: 354). French were particularly interested in wheat, yet Roger Sarret, involved in negotiations on the French side, let Paris know that the Romanian stock for export was insufficient, but the demand could be supplemented with beans, peas and lentils. While the supply of products proceeded according to the established plan in the summer, the Reich limited France's access to the Romanian market towards the end of 1943, via intensifying the purchase of vegetables, grains and oil, thus leading to a price increase. On the other hand, they impeded the products bought by the French to reach their destination through different methods (Ana Maria Stan, 2006: 357). The situation eased after September 1943, when the commercial treaty between Romania and Germany stipulated free transit of the Romanian agricultural products to France, following the urging from Roger Sarret and Paul Morand (Ana Maria Stan, 2006:357).

In conclusion, we can say that the fall of 1943 better coagulated the forces and groups of the French Resistance, also mirrored in the activity of the French legation in Bucharest. In 1943, it was clear to the Romanian Intelligence Services that the entire French diplomatic corps in Bucharest was Gaullist oriented. The political-military situation of France, as well as the evolution of the front in Europe, helped the French Resistance action in Bucharest be increasingly visible and expressed through official channels, clearly manifested in the French Minister Jacques Truelle leaving his post and going to Ankara and then to Algiers, where he rallied to the Gaullist movement. Meanwhile, the Gaullist Resistance movement took shape and was formally supported by the great powers. The episode of Minister Truelle's departure from

Romania strained both Franco-German and German-Romanian relations, as the German authorities in Bucharest accused the Romanian leadership of complicity. From an economic perspective, the Romanian-French relations improved, thanks to concluding a new economic treaty, which aided France more in the context of their national food crisis, and also shielded it more against the various types of German sabotage. As a result, the year of 1943 and the manner in which the French legation in Bucharest interacted with the government authorities clearly confirmed the long-standing friendship between the two states and also Romania's position to remain loyal to the Allied powers and to defend its national interests, even under the exceptional circumstances of the Second World War.

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