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***A forewarning of a massacre in the antechamber of war? The German Legation in Bucharest and the diplomatic scandal of the "Microbes" (1916)***

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After Romania declared war against Austria-Hungary (14/27 August 1916), the German Legation left Bucharest in a hostile atmosphere. The diplomatic staff had an eventful journey to Berlin. German subjects were arrested throughout Romania. Adding insult to injury, the Romanian authorities started a huge diplomatic scandal: in early October, the Prefect of the Bucharest Police, assisted by the first secretary of the United States diplomatic representative, uncovered, in the garden of the German Legation to Bucharest, explosive materials and a package with bottles containing the anthrax bacillus which could be used to infect animals and humans. The Romanian authorities transformed the incident into an unprecedented propaganda onslaught. The Romanian diplomatic representatives were given the mission to present to all of Europe and to the entire world the way the German diplomacy was secretly preparing bacteriological war, with the purpose of exterminating the population of Bucharest. The alleged crime was easy to set against the background of the negative image the propaganda of the Entente states had carefully built around examples of German barbarism and militarism. Important newspapers ( „Le Figaro”; „Le XXe Siecle”; „ Gazette de Lausanne”, etc.) published prominently on their front pages accounts from the Bucharest Ministry of Foreign Affairs about the bacillus. The League of Neutral States (Ligue des Pays Neutres) protested firmly through the voice of its ruling Committee. In London the Foreign Office published thousands of copies of a brochure called “Microbe-Culture at Bucharest. Discoveries at the German Legation. From the Rumanian Official Documents”. The scandal of the “microbes” further darkened the beginnings of the Romanian-German hostilities. It came to join the list of other incidents that caused protests. The Germans were accused of breaching the laws of war (airship bombing of unfortified Romanian towns, internment in camps of Romanian citizens in Germany, etc). Thus, the Romanian-German rivalry heated up to the level of a national historic confrontation. The war was not entirely “clean”. It was not just the armies that fought it. The diplomats and the propaganda waged their own battles. This was a war of attrition, which did not lack incidents and claims of violations of the laws of humanity. The accusations and the incidents of defamation delayed reconciliation of the two peoples for a long time. Popular rhetoric was for a while the proof of poisonous memories. For a long time in inter-war Germany, those who had fought in World War I cultivated the image of the Romanian betrayal of 1916; meanwhile, the Romanians turned the “horrors” of the German military occupation into a national obsession.