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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)"

In the configuration of modern-times international relations, a state of war involves a number of diplomatic acts that attenuate and sometimes prevent regrettable behaviours and instinctive manifestations on the part of human subjects. As a rule, between the public authorities of the belligerent countries there exist cooperation mechanisms and reciprocity practices meant to ensure the protection of diplomatic representation staff, to prevent the violation of fundamental rights and liberties. According to universal moral principles, war should not delay the conclusion of peace and should not perpetuate hatred among peoples and nations. The resumption of diplomatic ties in times of peace would be very much hindered if historical rivalries did not die down in time. But, as we know, the unfolding of World War I did not leave much room for humanitarian principles. It was a total war, a war of attrition, in which the combatant parties used all means possible to obtain the final victory. In order to intimidate and humiliate the enemy, even the ethics of diplomacy was breached¹.

Romania decided to enter the war on 15/26 august 1916. We do not need to analyse here the rationale of this decision; territorial gain and the realization of the national ideal were the fundamental motivation. It happened on a Sunday, but it had been thoroughly planned. On top of the agitation cause by the army mobilisation, of the enthusiasm of the population, one more event occurred, heating spirits up even more. Rumours say that the courtyard of the German Legation, deserted by the diplomatic staff, is hiding explosives and phials of bacilli. The Capital's Police Prefect, accompanied by the first secretary of the America Legation², went on location, where they were met

¹ Jules Cambon, France's ambassador in Berlin, remembered being treated like a prisoner. His passports were handed too him straight away, by the Germans altered his travel route several times. A police detail accompanied him to the train station, where he was met only by a few low-ranking German clerks. Before the train crossed the Kiel canal, the soldiers searched his luggage, and when he entered Denmark he had to buy a ticket, paying for it in gold. See also Marcus Mösslang, Torsten Riote, *The Diplomats' World. A cultural History of Diplomacy, 1815-1914*. German Historical Institute, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 227.

² Arguing that the presence of explosives must be proven by the government, the Minister Plenipotentiary for the United States, Charles J. Vopicka, protested and rejected the request of the Romanian authorities. However, he did not hurry to notify Berlin of the event. He drafted a report to the State Department instead. Eventually, he caved in to pressure and sent William Whiting Andrews, as an American delegate, to the German Legation. Bernard Cook, Dumitru Preda, *United States of America and Romania. Diplomatic Relations, 1912-1919*, Cavaliotti, Bucharest, 2010. See also Charles J. Vopicka, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister

by Michael Markus, the building's watchman, and a local, one Andrei Maftעי, who had been given permission to live in the building. The reason for the visit is the suspicion – which had meanwhile become a certainty – that before the mobilisation of the Romanian army had been decided officially and before the cutting of diplomatic ties, therefore during the neutrality period, The German Imperial government had flagrantly breached international regulations, clandestinely bringing prohibited substances on Romanian territory³. The research showed that the materials buried in the Legation's garden on the day before the war was declared included 50 'Bickford cords', with charges, and 50 metal boxes of an elongated rectangular shape. One other box was found, containing six wooden cylinders, each with a glass tube inside, containing a yellowish-looking liquid. In the box, a typed note in the German language reveals criminal intentions: "Herewith 4 tubes for horses and 4 for horned cattle. For use as directed. Each tube is sufficient for 200 head. If possible, administer direct through the animals' mouth; if not, in its fodder. Should be obliged for a little report on success with you. If there should be good news to report, Herr K.'s presence here for a day desirable."⁴. The prefect sealed the boxes and sent part of them for various laboratory tests⁵. On 24 September, the Military Pyrotechnics Department confirmed in the lab report nr. 31/1916 that the 50 boxes in zinc sheeting were in fact mine-cartridges with the dimensions of 20 x 5 x 7 cm, with three priming points on three surfaces. The cartridges bore the mark «Sprengstoff A. G. Carbonit Hamburg-Schlebusch », and the explosive charge consisted of trinitrotoluene mixed with mononitrotoluene. The 50 fuses, each of them 20 metres long, were common fuses used for detonation, each of them having a detonating cap containing 2 g of fulminate of mercury. Both the caps and the fuses were found to be perfectly operational. Concerning their capacity of destruction – the Pyrotechnics report reads – it is enough to mention that 200 grams of said explosives placed on a railway track would cause its destruction over

Plenipotentiary for Romania, Serbia and Bulgaria, to Robert Lansing, U.S. Secretary of State, concerning the finding of explosives at the German Legation in Bucharest, p. 45.

³ The attention of Romanian authorities focussed at first of the German Consulate in Bucharest, where the diplomatic courier brought periodically suspicious crates and packages. The sender was always the same, the German Consulate in Braşov. On 14/27 August, that is right before the mobilisation of the Romanian army, a great deal of the suspicious cargo is transferred in a great hurry to the Legation building, located at a considerable distance from the Consulate. The notes in red ink found on the labels affixed to the suspicious boxes also indicate the complicity of Bulgarian officials: colonel Samargieff, military attaché at the Bulgarian Legation in Bucharest, Constantin Kostoff, delegate to the Romanian Directorate of Railroads for the management of the Bulgarian railways. In pencil, slightly erased, the labels also contain the name of the German military attaché, colonel Hammerstein.

⁴ AMAE (Archives of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs --), Collection 71/1914 E2. *Infrafracțiuni la legile războiului* (Infractions on the laws of war), vol. 106, sheets 144-145.

⁵ Before being sent for laboratory tests, the bombs and the boxes went to the American Legation. The American Minister Vopicka, fearing an accidental explosion, ordered them removed. Charles J. Vopicka, *Secrets Of The Balkans: Seven Years Of A Diplomatist's Life In The Storm Center Of Europe*, 1921 (p. 106 in the Romanian translation, published in Iași, Institutul European Publishing, 2012).

a length of one metre. The 50 kilograms of explosive found in this case could have destroyed a bridge-pier or a large building. The fuses equipped with detonating caps could be employed to cause an explosion on both wet and dry ground⁶. A little while later (28 September), Victor Babeş, head of the Institute of Pathology and Bacteriology, wrote to the Prefect and reported that the liquid the laboratory subjected to tests would have caused incurable disease in animals. Anthrax and glanders, two of the most dangerous contagious diseases, would have spread, causing significant epizootics⁷.

The Romanian Foreign Ministry exploited the event immediately and an enormous scandal erupts. The opportunity could not be missed, because the story of the «microbes» fitted too well the image of German barbarities, the favourite topic of the Entente propaganda since the start of the war. The news ripples Europe from one end to another. The Romanian Legations abroad receive a protest note, accompanied by copies of the incriminating documents, which they have to send to the governments of neutral and allied states. The government felt obliged to denounce vehemently such criminal manoeuvres and especially the use of microbe cultures, a dishonouring weapon, certainly worse than the use of poison, prohibited to combatant parties according to the terms of article IV in the Hague Convention. The Ministry note also invoked the unprecedented violation of the obligations concerning loyalty and honest conduct imposed by the international law on diplomatic representatives in exchange for the prerogatives and privileges granted to the latter⁸.

Then followed the press articles. Several important newspapers published detailed accounts, others preferred the protest note. The Minister in Berne, who, surprisingly, had not received any copies of the protest note and on the accompanying documents, reported that the periodical "L'Illustration" of 18 November had published under the title "Dans le jardin d'une Légation allemande" ("In the garden of a German Legation") captioned photographs of the explosive cartridges, of the tubes with microbes and of the seal of the Braşov German Consulate, the "silent" intermediary of the action⁹. The Romanian "Le Figaro" correspondent, Robert de Lezeau, sent a long letter, which the Parisian daily published under the title "Une infamie allemande" ("A German infamy")¹⁰. Indeed, the French newspapers stigmatized as hard as they could the appalling behaviour of the German

⁶ AMAE. Collection 71/1914 E2. Letter from the Army Pyrotechnics to the Directorate of General Security, Bucharest, 24 September 1916, sheet 149.

⁷ *Ibidem*. Institute of Pathology and Bacteriology, Bucharest, 28 September 1916, sheet 122

⁸ *Ibidem*. Letter from Ministry of Foreign Affairs to the Legations in Paris, London, Petrograd, Corfu, Le Havre, Berne, Haga, Athens and Rome, 12 November 1916, sheets 111, 114-115.

⁹ *Ibidem*. *Romanian Legation in Switzerland*. Berne, report of 17/30 December 1916, sheet 155.

¹⁰ The text was printed in its entirety in «Gazette de Lausanne», issue of 29 December 1916. *Ibidem*, sheet 156.

diplomats in Bucharest. Some of them also printed a German document, according to which the microbes were only targeting livestock. It was very well known, though, that the effects of these diseases on animals would have decisively and irremediably affected the health of humans. Interesting opinions were also published by the prestigious "Le Temps". A long time after that (Tuesday, 25 September 1917), the French paper still published accounts of the incident. Under the title "L' Amerique et la guerre" ("America and the war"), the readers find a new series of reports concerning the German plot. A report by the former secretary of the United States Legation in Bucharest, William Andrews, had been published in Washington by the Secretary of State Robert Lansing. In printing it, the French press printed in fact his revelations, along with the protest of the former Romanian Foreign Minister, Emanoil Porumbaru, the one who brought back to the public eye the appalling gesture through which the German diplomats, sheltered by their immunity, tried to plot against Romania and its subjects¹¹. In Belgium, the daily "Le XX-e Siècle" ("The 20th Century") published unflattering remarks about the German diplomats, who were viewed, in the interpretation of the Romanian minister accredited in Le Havre, as "plotters of the most anarchic variety". The daily also printed a provocative title: "Felonie et Barbarie. Les diplomats de la kultur a Bucarest" ("Felony and Barbarism. The diplomats of kultur in Bucharest". The accusations, in keeping with the protest note sent by the Romanian government, expose the deplorable conduct of the German diplomats, who, in times of peace, were guilty of procuring explosives and bacilli that were meant for use against the Romanians. The involvement of the counselor of the German Legation (Rheinhaben), who organised the entire operation under the cover provided by his direct superior (the Minister accredited in Bucharest), not only proved the premeditated nature of the action, but also the fact that the entire operation had been planned in the higher spheres of diplomacy. The evidence was impossible to refute, the article stated, when "you're caught red-handed", a clear allusion to the crimes committed by the Germans in Belgium, which the Wolff press agency had tried so vehemently to deny¹². Pushed by the press, the ripples of the affair reached the Belgian Foreign Ministry as well. There was talk in the highest circles about "the savage actions of Germany", insufficiently highlighted by the world press. Such lawlessness deserved to be made known, as it was unprecedented¹³.

¹¹ *Ibidem*. La future guerre bacteriologique... (The future bacteriological war), sheets 185-186; 187-189.

¹² *Ibidem*. Romanian Legation, Le Havre, 3/16 January 1917, sheets 159-160.

¹³ Trandafir G. Djuvara, *Misiunile mele diplomatice (1887- 1925) (My diplomatic missions - 1887-1925)*, Iași, Institutul European Publishing, 2009, pp. 154-155.

In terms of protest, the League of Neutral Countries was also present. Through the voice of its president, Louis Macon, a citizen of Geneva, the League's Directing Committee drafted a note pointing out that, bearing in mind the discoveries made in the garden of the German Legation, the entire action was considered to have been premeditated by high German officials and a "criminal act", committed in times of peace against a neutral state. In the end, the note even calls for severe sanctions, during the war (!!!) or after it, to be taken against the perpetrators of this dangerous attempt¹⁴. The surprise, however, comes from London, there where the Foreign Office published, out of its own funds, a brochure with the title "Microbe-Culture at Bukarest. Discoveries at the German Legation. From The Rumanian Official Documents", which it distributes at the modest price of one penny, in several thousand copies, also translated in languages other than English, so that everyone would understand what sort of means the German government would use in fighting the war¹⁵.

The echoes of the affair dies down very late. When the war was over, the French physician L. Georges, an army surgeon inspector and health director of the 20th Army Corps of Nancy, requested from the Romanian Foreign Minister (Take Ionescu) new information on the issue¹⁶. The request came via the Romanian military attaché in Paris, and was recorded in the mail register of the Romanian Ministry of Foreign Affairs on 6 December 1921. The French physician was requesting access to edifying documents, as well as a copy of the Green Book, printed by the government in order to justify wartime policies. The doctor also mentioned several issues that in his opinion still needed to be clarified: what were the exact circumstances and the date the mentioned deliveries had been made to the Bucharest Legation; whether the German laboratories that had produced the germ products could be precisely identified; any excerpts on the issue from the Romanian press of the time. The answer given by Take Ionescu appears to be quite evasive. A Green Book had not been published and the lack of information limited the search for further data¹⁷.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*. League of Neutral Countries. Amsterdam, protest of 8 April 1917, sheet 169.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*. London, report of 28 June / 1 July, 1917, sheets 179-180.

¹⁶ The research carried out by the French physician Georges was only a personal enterprise, and definitely not an official one. His curiosity could probably be explained by an occasional interest, caused by the issue of barbarities committed during wars. This hypothesis is also supported by the interest shown to the writings about war history and chronology authored by Salomon Reinach and published by the Berger Levrault publishing house. For Wednesday, 11 October, the army surgeon inspector had read on page 110 of volume V about Russian communiqués concerning the fact that an enemy air force squadron had dropped over Constanța several bombs carrying the cholera microbe.

¹⁷ AMAE. Collection 71/1914 E2. Infracțiuni la legile războiului (Infractiions on the laws of war), vol. 106. Romanian Military Attaché in Paris, to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Paris, 26 November 1921, sheets 183-184. See also the letter of the French physician L. Georges to the Romanian Army Commandant, Major Potopceanu, an intern with the 20th Army Corps General Headquarters, sheets 190-192.

"The bacteriologic war " – as some foreign journalists dubbed it – ended without any dramatic consequences for the Romanian society. It remained a plausible threat distorted in a propaganda confrontation, the sole objective of which was to denigrate the opponents. There could not be no benefit in it. The Romanian minister accredited in Le Havre mentioned bitterly that the allied note concerning the atrocities committed by the Germans during the war did not include the incident in Bucharest¹⁸. However, the incident elicited some interest in the capitals of the neutral states. The news coming from Bucharest showed that the German diplomacy had not observed the requirements of neutrality anywhere. For the allied powers, fully engaged in the war, the conduct of German diplomats strengthened the belief that Berlin was waging an unfair war, using any means possible to obtain victory. A good signal for propaganda, amid less-encouraging developments in the battles on the Western front. Official documents do not indicate precisely what the German officials intended to do with the explosive material and the germ phials in Romania. All the information available points to the fact that they were preparing a monstrous experiment. An experiment that never took place, due to the unexpected outbreak of war. A forewarning of a massacre? In times of peace such a phrase might appear exaggerated. However, in the circumstances of the time, at war, any biological weapon could have been devastating. For Romania, a country with farming potential, an outbreak of disease among its livestock would have produced a collective drama, and dire suffering and lack of food supplies not only for the army, but also for the population, a predominantly impoverished and rural one. What was Berlin's reason for this act? The loss of a potential strategically deeply hurt Germany's ego and weakened the position of the Central Powers in South-East Europe. What diplomacy had lost, the army was called to recover. Above all, Romania's "treason" had to be punished. Nothing appeared degrading enough in the given circumstances.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*. Romanian Legation. Le Havre 3/16 January 1917, sheet 159.