

**THE BATTLE OF TURTUCAIA (TUTRAKAN)
(2-6 SEPTEMBER 1916):
ROMANIA'S GRIEF, BULGARIA'S GLORY**

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On 27 August 1916, Romania declared war on Austria-Hungary and sent three armies across the Carpathian passes to occupy Transylvania as promised in a secret treaty with the Entente signed two weeks before. A wave of delirious joy swept over Bucharest at the prospect of annexing the "cradle of the Romanian race."¹ Vastly outnumbered Habsburg defenders offered little resistance and within a few days Romanian troops occupied Orșova, Petroșani, Brașov, and the suburbs of Sibiu. The Romanian war plan, whose priority was to advance quickly to the strategically important Mureș river, appeared to be working to perfection. But this initial success was short-lived. On 2 September, Bulgarian forces, supplemented by a small German detachment, besieged the southern Romanian fortress of Turtucaia located across the Danube only 60 kilometers from Bucharest. The surrender of the fortress and its garrison of more than 25,000 after only four days of inept defense had a crucial impact on both Romania and her enemies. For the Bulgarians, the recovery of Turtucaia, taken by Romania in 1913, was something "holy" which they embraced with their "entire soul." It enlivened their zeal to fight and strengthened their commitment to the Central Powers.² This quick victory on Romania's southern frontier also brought encouragement to Austro-German leaders who faced a serious military crisis as a result of Romania's unexpected intervention.³ In Romania, on the other hand, the fall of Turtucaia triggered sudden panic. Among civilians there were visions of invasion, defeat, and retribution from ancient enemies. Yesterday's hopes of a *România Mare* (Greater Romania) were replaced by fears of a *România Mici* (Smaller Romania).⁴ More importantly, the Romanian High Command (MCG) impulsively abandoned its war plan thereby ushering in a series of defeats which

ended only in December with the Central Powers occupying two-thirds of the Romanian homeland.

The Battle of Turtucaia has remained a vivid memory in both Romania and Bulgaria. Even though the Romanians repossessed the city during the interwar period, this defeat continued to be the most embarrassing episode of their participation in the First World War. "This name rings painfully in the ears of every Romanian" wrote their most influential historian of the war, "It is linked to the greatest defeat of our holy war: a grievous, humiliating, ignominious defeat...." Even in 2001, a Romanian writer would describe it as an "ugly" memory.⁵ For the Bulgarians, in contrast, the Battle of Turtucaia has remained a "page of glory," "one of the crowns of Bulgarian military skill."⁶ Its memory was invoked in 1940-1941 when Bulgaria recovered the city and once again entered into an alliance with Germany. It has been memorialized in a museum and in periodic historical symposia, the most recent being in 1996 on the 80th anniversary of the battle.⁷

Fortress Turtucaia

Originally a Roman camp and subsequently a Turkish fortress, Turtucaia formed an integral part of independent Bulgaria created in 1885. Along with the remainder of Southern Dobrogea, it was incorporated into Romania as a result of the Second Balkan War (1913). Situated at the extreme western point of the province, Bulgarians resented it as a "spike into the heart of Bulgarian territory."⁸ As an anchor of the Romanian defensive system in Dobrogea, Turtucaia was intensively fortified in 1913-1916 with the aid of Belgian military engineers. These defenses, as yet unfinished in 1916, consisted of three concentric lines of defense, anchored on the Danube, with a radius of eight kilometers and a circumference of 35. The most advanced position, some 1000 meters deep, consisted primarily of small outposts of pickets designed for surveillance and to force an enemy to reveal his intentions. About four kilometers back, on the heights overlooking the city, was the primary line of defense. It incorporated 15 "centers of resistance" or forts about two kilometers apart. These were mostly of earthen construction with only limited concrete.⁹ These forts were linked by a system of shallow trenches and protected by barbed wire obstacles. Although the latter were 10-15 meters wide,

they were not continuous and so low "a small dog could jump over it."¹⁰

Four kilometers behind the primary line of resistance stood a primitive secondary line. It consisted of a single row of neglected trenches, partly collapsed, with some barbed wire but without artillery or machine guns. Its value was extremely limited. For command purposes, the entire defensive system was divided into three sectors: I (west), II (south), and III (east), each with its own local commander.¹¹ Most of the artillery the garrison possessed was in the primary line. Guns of light caliber (37mm, 53mm) predominated. Many of those of heavier caliber were not mobile and incapable of firing toward the flank or rear. Some were not yet operational and/or lacked shells of the correct caliber. Shortages would be aggravated by a lack of firing discipline. Prominently represented at Turtucaia were ancient cannon salvaged from dismantled forts around Bucharest and the abandoned Focșani line on the ramparts of Moldavia. Naval guns from the decommissioned cruiser *Elisabeth* were emplaced along the Danube shore.¹² Little wonder a contemporary could compare Turtucaia to "an artillery museum."¹³ However, the fortress gained some firepower from Romanian Danube monitors which controlled this stretch of the river.

As commentators have pointed out, Turtucaia's fortifications, based on nineteenth century models, provided some protection against infantry and light artillery but little against guns of heavy caliber. Although found wanting when compared with Western European fortifications, they were considered good by Balkan standards.¹⁴ But, unfortunately, the defensive philosophy implemented at Turtucaia ignored the lessons learned on other battlefields 1914-1916: the vulnerability of fixed fortifications without a supporting mobile force, the indispensability of heavy artillery, and the danger of concentrating all resources on a single line of defense.¹⁵ Another fundamental weakness of fortress Turtucaia was its location: exposed at the western tip of Dobrogea, far from Russo-Romanian forces further east and without a secure connection with the Romanian heartland. Although linked to Oltenița, directly across the Danube, by a submerged telephone cable and an array of small boats, it had no bridge. While its less important sister fortress downstream at Silistra enjoyed a pontoon connection, Turtucaia remained a "bridgehead without a bridge."¹⁶

Defenders and Attackers

The garrison at Turtucaia formed part of the Romanian III Army Eastern Group which was charged with the defense of Dobrogea. To cover a frontier of 160 kilometers, these forces were widely scattered: the 17th Infantry Division (ID) at Turtucaia, the 9th ID at Silistra 60 kilometers to the east, and the 19th ID, together with the 5th Călărași (cavalry) Brigade, near Bazargic, an additional 80 kilometers away. The Romanians recognized that these forces were insufficient but trusted that their deficiencies would be remedied by the arrival of the Russian Army Corps promised in the Russo-Romanian military convention of 14 August 1916. But, unknown to the Romanians, its commander, General Andrei Zaionchkovskii, was loath to fight in Romania and his "corps" consisted only of a Cossack cavalry division, an exhausted Russian infantry division, and a Serb infantry division recently recruited from among Austro-Hungarian prisoners of war. All were undermanned so that instead of the 50,000 the Romanians expected this questionable force totaled less than 30,000.¹⁷ The III Army was commanded by General Mihail Aslan, considered by some "to have been among the best prepared commanders in the Romanian army." Others remember him as a dilettante who neglected his headquarters for the card tables at the Jockey Club in Bucharest.¹⁸ But whatever his personal qualities, Aslan had a competent staff¹⁹ and, as we shall see later, his judgment (or that of his staff) often proved sounder than that of the Romanian MCG. He entered upon his command only four days before the attack on Turtucaia. While he was given a prior briefing on the defenses in Dobrogea, he was denied an opportunity to make a personal inspection. Aslan insists he pointed out to MCG the obvious deficiencies of the Third Army which, compared with the armies in the north, had been given a low priority in personnel and equipment.²⁰

The commander of the fortress and of the 17th ID was General Constantin Teodorescu. He had received his advanced military education at the War Academy in Vienna and had earned a reputation as a military teacher and writer. But, although assigned in 1915 to oversee the construction of Turtucaia's fortifications, he was not an engineer. While some conclude he would probably have been successful in a field campaign, he proved unsuitable as a fortress comman-

der.²¹ His staff was small, one major and two captains and, despite repeated requests, he had not been assigned an artillery commander. His requests for more and heavier artillery and better means of intelligence also remained unfilled. Turtucaia had no airplanes or balloons for observation, as did the enemy, and virtually no cavalry for reconnaissance. Information gathering through spies or ships along the Danube had been prohibited on the eve of war to avoid provoking a Bulgarian attack. Romanian military intelligence and communication in general was so inefficient Teodorescu first learned of the Bulgarian declaration of war through public rumor.²²

The 17th ID which encompassed the majority of Turtucaia's defenders was an exaggerated example of the weaknesses of the Romanian army as a whole. It had been newly organized with two reserve and two regular regiments. But even the latter had been diluted by incorporating many raw recruits.²³ Together with auxiliary units, the garrison initially totaled 20,000 men of which 15,000 were combatants. Its cadre was especially inadequate. Reserve officers predominated. Chosen from among the educated, most were school teachers, lawyers or other intellectuals with only minimal training. They had, as Teodorescu maintained and others agreed, "a tendency to leave their troops in the moment of peril and gave signs of panic."²⁴ As the result of the far-reaching reorganization that accompanied mobilization, many of these reserve officers were strangers to their men. Even regular officers had not yet established firm relationships with the troops they commanded.²⁵ The skill level of the soldiers they led, was also low. Many reservists were older men whose 30 days of annual training had been diminished by liberal absences for home visits.²⁶ Crews of heavy artillery batteries at Turtucaia were in some cases infantrymen who first saw their guns at mobilization and had never fired them.²⁷ The morale of the garrison at Turtucaia was especially poor. Defending territory recently acquired with an alien population, they lacked the incentive of liberating co-nationals which their comrades fighting in Transylvania enjoyed. To make matters worse, the defenders of Turtucaia felt insecure, isolated in a "bridgehead without a bridge," facing an enemy they perceived as better equipped, passionate and cruel in battle.²⁸ However, the greatest weakness of both men and leaders at Turtucaia was a lack of combat experience or

even training under fire. They were particularly unnerved by enemy artillery which their own could not answer. Asked early on by the German High Command (OHL) to comment on the fighting ability of the Romanian soldier, German staff on the Dobrogean front replied: "...the Romanians do not stand firm against heavy artillery" and when "the attacking infantry approaches to some hundred meters, [they] evacuate their positions."²⁹ But the performance of the Romanian army at its baptism of fire must be kept in perspective. Some of these same shortcomings were exhibited by other belligerents in their opening campaigns. And, to their credit, Romanian soldiers and officers, after gaining training, equipment, and experience comparable to their opponents, fought extremely well in 1917.³⁰

The force attacking Turtucaia was part of the Northern Bulgarian Battle Group commanded by German Field Marshal August von Mackensen.³¹ His reputation as the conqueror of Serbia provoked respect among the Bulgarians and apprehension among the Romanians. Mackensen's task was to cripple the Romanian offensive capability in Dobrogea preparatory to undertaking an assault across the Danube and a march on Bucharest. Such a threat from the south was intended to undercut the Romanian advance into Transylvania. The early capture of Turtucaia was a precondition for the Dobrogean offensive.³² Mackensen's Battle Group consisted of the III Bulgarian Army, commanded by General Stefan Toshev,³³ supplemented by several German detachments. Two Turkish divisions would arrive later. Most of the units of the III Army were without direct combat experience, having been stationed in Northern Bulgaria during the 1915-1916 campaign against Serbia. However, they had profited from a number of recent improvements in the Bulgarian army, including the addition of more machine gun companies and heavy artillery as well as better transport and communications. All of this was thanks to their German allies who also provided less welcome tutelage.³⁴ The immediate attack force at Turtucaia was composed of the Bulgarian 4th ID, one brigade of the Bulgarian 1st ID and a detachment of four German battalions commanded by Lt. Colonel Kurt Baron von Hammerstein.³⁵ The attack commander was General Pantalei Kiselov (1863-1927), a hero of the Bulgarian-Serbian War of 1885. He had received specialized staff training in France which undoubtedly influenced his

preference for frontal assault. This led to a degree of friction with Mackensen and his staff who, on the basis of German experience on the western front, preferred to reduce fortifications with heavy artillery before launching an infantry assault. Nonetheless, Kiselov was rated an excellent officer by the Germans as was his chief of staff Colonel Stefan Noykov. Together, they represented the top divisional leadership in the III Army.³⁶

Kiselov faced several practical problems. His duties as attack group commander were in addition to his continuing function as commander of the 4th ID. However, he was given no additional staff. As a consequence, coordination among his units was poor with orders and reports habitually late. For example, completed maps and plans of Romanian fortifications were not distributed until 5 September, three days into the battle.³⁷ Kiselov had only a 1.4 to 1 overall numerical superiority, a ratio generally considered inadequate for an offensive. However, by concentrating his forces on the main area of attack (Sector II south), he achieved a local advantage of 2.25 to 1.³⁸ Kiselov was also disadvantaged by the lack of supporting fire from Danube monitors which the Romanians enjoyed. The Austro-Hungarian flotilla had been bottled up in the Persina channel upstream by passive and active Romanian measures.³⁹ However, Kiselov's main cause of concern was the possibility of a flank attack by Russo-Romanian forces coming from eastern Dobrogea.⁴⁰ On the other hand, Kiselov's forces enjoyed important advantages. First, they were operating on former national territory inhabited primarily by Bulgarians. This gave them a huge advantage in intelligence. Before the war, Bulgarian agents were able to carry out ground reconnaissance in and around Turtucaia with the assistance of local inhabitants.⁴¹ This source was supplemented by aerial reconnaissance provided by the Germans. Consequently, the Bulgarians were quite well-informed on the Romanian forces defending Turtucaia and had mapped out the pattern of its forts. But the most important advantage Kiselov possessed was the high morale of his troops who were convinced they were fighting a war of liberation. Some were natives of the Turtucaia region who had emigrated after 1913. As they crossed the frontier local inhabitants greeted them with "hurrahs." Some of the soldiers knelt to kiss the soil, vowing to return all of southern Dobrogea to the motherland. For

them "the hour of reckoning" had come. They were ready to die at Turtucaia.⁴²

The Siege of Turtucaia (2-4 September)

On the morning of 2 September, German-Bulgarian forces crossed the frontier and approached Turtucaia's preliminary defensive line. In Sector II (south) where the main attack was focused, units of the 4th ID easily overran the Romanian outposts. The defenders, after a token counterattack, retreated so quickly not a single Romanian fell captive. In Sector III (east), Romanian forces withdrew even before being attacked. Only in Sector I (west) did the attackers meet significant resistance. Here, Hammerstein advanced quite easily at first, thanks to self-propelled "automobile" cannon. These fearsome novelties appeared to intimidate many Romanian soldiers. But later in the day the Germans were halted by Romanian artillery fire, especially from Danube monitors.⁴³ But, overall, by the evening of this first day, the defenders of Turtucaia had abandoned most of the preliminary line of resistance in favor of their second (primary) line of defense. The Bulgarians were amazed at Romanian passivity.⁴⁴ During the night of 2-3 September, despite not being attacked, Romanian artillery and infantry fired continually, sometimes into the air as if to frighten off the enemy, wasting precious ammunition in the process. That evening Teodorescu's telegrams to MCG and to III Army headquarters showed his alarm at the magnitude of the enemy attack and indicated that he was inclined to retreat.⁴⁵

The Romanian chain of command was slow to recognize the seriousness of the threat to Turtucaia. Prime Minister Ion I. C. Brătianu, when informed of the attack is said to have retorted: "It is a simple demonstration.... There they [Bulgarians] have only a brigade while General Teodorescu has a division."⁴⁶ The initial response from MCG was simply to decree that Turtucaia "must resist to the end."⁴⁷ Attempts were undertaken to send Teodorescu additional troops from reserves in and around Bucharest. However, the first contingent was unable to board troop trains because the railroad stations were blocked. This general congestion and confusion which characterized the Romanian mobilization also caused a second contingent to consume 40 hours traveling the 60 kilometers to Oltenița. To overcome