

such problems, motor vehicles were pressed into service, including private automobiles and taxi cabs requisitioned off the streets of Bucharest.⁴⁸ Unfortunately for the Romanians, the analogy with the Battle of the Marne ended there.

The next two days (3-4 September) were relatively quiet as the Bulgarians moved up their infantry and artillery for the main assault. But, under the pressure of merely local action, even simple infantry patrols, the Romanians gave ground. On the evening of 3 September, a poorly informed Romanian local commander ordered a needless retreat which, because of darkness, was carried out in great disorder. This retreat left several forts without infantry cover.⁴⁹ Kiselov had intended the main attack to begin on 4 September but was forced to delay it 24 hours because neither his heavy artillery nor his observers were ready and because he had temporarily lost contact with the Hammerstein detachment. German officers were quick to blame the former on Bulgarian indolence but in reality the culprits were heavy rain and miserable terrain. Water buffalo draft animals, true to their nature, would lie down in the mud, to be aroused only by lighting a fire under them.⁵⁰ The result was another day of reprieve for the defenders of Turtucaia.

This delay provided the Romanian command with several options. One was for the garrison to take the initiative and counter-attack while the Bulgarians were moving up their forces. Before the war, Teodorescu had requested a mobile force capable of a flanking maneuver but had received only four battalions of inexperienced militia. It does not appear that he or his superiors even considered such action. After the initial advance into Transylvania during the first week of the war, Romanian commanders at all levels became timid and repeatedly surrendered the initiative to the enemy. But, given the nature of the garrison and its commander, an attempt to launch a major counterblow at Turtucaia would have failed anyway. A second option was to initiate a timely evacuation eastward to consolidate all Russo-Romanian forces in Dobrogea in a more defensible position. Unfortunately, MCG was adamantly opposed to what appears in retrospect to have been the only way of averting a disaster at Turtucaia. Late on 3 September and throughout the next day as Teodorescu's stream of pessimistic reports by telephone and telegraph reached MCG, it was assumed that he was simply suffering a "loss of nerve."

The response was to offer him encouragement, including a personal call from King Ferdinand. When Teodorescu's "choruses" of alarm continued, as Major Radu Rosetti, the director of operations at MCG recounts, "I sent him many times a day the recommendation to fight on."⁵¹ It appears that MCG was obsessed with holding on at Turtucaia in defiance of both tactical and strategic logic.

At Romanian III Army headquarters, however, a more realistic, albeit tardy, assessment was beginning to emerge. At mid-day on 4 September, Lt. Colonel Gheorghe Dabija, Aslan's chief of operations, received a telephone call from Teodorescu which sounded as if all were lost: "...the situation is desperate and there is no hope to resist much longer..." Dabija forwarded this message to MCG and added: "General Aslan is of the opinion that if the garrison at Turtucaia can no longer resist, it should make a withdrawal toward Silistra." The response from MCG minutes later, was adamant: "Turtucaia must not fall, the garrison must resist to the last man because fresh troops will come to help. This is the Sovereign Order of His Majesty the King."⁵² Rejection of a timely evacuation to the east meant not only the loss of Turtucaia but also its 25,000 defenders. What would have been only an embarrassing retreat from a prominent but vulnerable outpost would now become a national catastrophe with far-reaching repercussions.

Not realizing how quickly the defense of Turtucaia would collapse, the Romanian command still held out hope for a third option, sending relief from Russo-Romanian forces elsewhere in Dobrogea. German and Bulgarian commanders were apprehensive about an attack from this quarter on the flank or rear of their forces at Turtucaia. A recent Bulgarian commentator concludes that such an attack in force could have resulted in "a military catastrophe" for Kiselov.⁵³ But, the attempt to dispatch a relief expedition to Turtucaia was too little, too late and ended in an embarrassing fiasco. On 3 September, Aslan ordered Russian-Romanian forces in eastern Dobrogea and at Silistra to undertake offensive action to the southwest, toward Kurtbunar, which would have been an indirect threat to the besiegers of Turtucaia.⁵⁴ But the 19th Romanian ID farthest to the east was hardly in a position to help. Plagued by the same deficiencies in personnel, equipment, and leadership as their counterparts at Turtucaia, several of its units had already panicked before limited

Bulgarian attacks near Bazargic and were currently in retreat.⁵⁵ The search for a relief expedition then centered on the Russian 47th Corps. But Zaionchkovskii, who was contemptuous of his ally and not inclined to pull "Romanian chestnuts" out of the fire, was determined to pursue his own agenda, the recapture of Bazargic.⁵⁶ On 4 September, Aslan sent him an urgent appeal to send all available units on a forced march toward Turtucaia. In order to ensure that Zaionchkovskii obliged, Aslan prevailed upon Stanislaus Poklevskii, the Russian minister in Bucharest and his comrade at the card table, to send a written appeal to be carried overnight by his military attaché Colonel Aleksandr Tatarinov. Zaionchkovskii, who considered Tatarinov a "pawn" of the Romanians, in effect ignored the order and continued his attack on Bazargic with the majority of his forces.⁵⁷ In defense of Zaionchkovskii it should be pointed out that even by forced march it would have been impossible to cover the 100 kilometers to Turtucaia before it surrendered on 6 September. On this even Romanian commentators agree.⁵⁸ But on the other hand, at the time of Aslan's order it was not known Turtucaia would fall so quickly. Hence Zaionchkovskii's behavior remains inexcusable.

The possibility of relief for Turtucaia was then reduced to the efforts of the Romanian 9th ID garrisoned at Silistra. On 4 September General Ion Basarabescu, the commandant at Silistra, sent an "offensive reconnaissance" in battalion strength toward the southwest. Upon meeting the first enemy resistance, it panicked and retreated in disorder back to Silistra.⁵⁹ A new, larger expedition was slow in getting organized and did not depart until late on 5 September. Just after noon on the next day near the village of Sarsânlar, when its advanced guard came under fire from enemy cavalry and artillery, the Romanian column began to retreat. Triggered by cries of "the Bulgarians are coming" and "flee from the Bulgarian cavalry," panic soon engulfed the expedition. Infantrymen threw down their weapons and fled, becoming entangled with the artillery. Cannoneers deserted their guns, mounted draft animals, and galloped to the rear. Supply and medical wagons, many of them driven by locals of Bulgarian or Turkish descent, joined the melee. A few courageous officers blocked the road with revolvers in hand and were able to stop some of the fugitives. Others continued their flight all the way to Silistra where

they touched off a panic within the city itself. A large part of the personnel of the supply and ambulance columns did not even pause there but continued their escape across the Danube to Călărași. Basarabescu, who had taken part in the expedition, demonstrated no leadership and passively accompanied the flight back to Silistra.⁶⁰

The Conquest of Turtucaia (5 -6 September)

On the morning of 5 September while these relief expeditions were getting underway, Kiselov launched his main assault on Turtucaia. At 5:30 AM an observation balloon pulled by an automobile ascended to direct the opening artillery barrage. Long range cannon concentrated on the Romanian forts and the obstacles between them. Bulgarian expectations that these would be totally wrecked were not achieved but the intensity of this barrage was sufficient to suppress the Romanians' counterfire and to intimidate their infantry. In Sector I (west) Hammerstein's detachment quickly captured three forts but accurate fire from the Romanian Danube flotilla again prevented a farther advance.⁶¹ In Sector II (south) beyond the range of these monitors, the Bulgarians advanced with "burning zeal"; two regiments charged singing "O Dobrogea, you are our earthly paradise."⁶² In the face of this fervent assault, Romanian unit commanders were loathe to counterattack.

Although Romanian artillery and infantry fire held up the Bulgarians briefly, they succeeded in penetrating the obstacles between the forts. Some of the attackers paused to invest the latter while others pushed forward. The Romanians, for the most part, began to abandon what was their only true line of defense. One local retreat triggered another. Too much of the withdrawal was carried out in panic and disorder.⁶³ Major Henning, the German liaison officer, later observed rows of dead Romanian soldiers, lying facing Turtucaia, shot in the back as they fled.⁶⁴ Reserves sent to the front quickly scattered when confronted with artillery fire. But here and there Romanian units did fight well. The 79th Infantry Regiment, despite suffering appalling losses which left it with only 400 effectives, reformed and counter-attacked. With the retreat of the Romanian infantry, the Bulgarians were able to move freely between the forts and surround the artillery emplacements. In some cases, Romanian gun crews resisted fiercely

and were subdued only in bloody hand to hand combat. Proof that not a few Romanians fought well can be found in Bulgarian casualty figures which reached 50% in some units fighting in Sector II.⁶⁵ However, in Sector III (east), the First Brigade of the I Bulgarian ID advanced northward toward the Danube, sweeping aside the Romanian defenders, capturing forts 13, 14, 15. At 6:30 PM, the Bulgarians had reached the eastern heights overlooking the river, completing the isolation of Turtucaia.⁶⁶ By nightfall on 5 September the Romanians had surrendered 13 of 15 forts and retreated to their last, primitive line of resistance.

That same evening, Colonel Gerhard Tappan, Mackensen's chief of staff, arrived for a meeting with Kiselov and a personal inspection. He was surprised and pleased. As he inspected the dark, now quiet battlefield near Fort 6 with Henning, he narrowly avoided capture when they stumbled upon a Romanian patrol. The Germans escaped by hiding like "rabbits" in the underbrush. There would have been no real problem, Henning joked with Tappan, because "if we had been captured this evening we would have been exchanged [as prisoners] tomorrow."⁶⁷ Despite the success of 5 September, not everything had gone smoothly for the Bulgarian-German attack forces. As they prepared to resume the advance on 6 September, some units of the 4th ID were so disorganized that it took the entire night to reform them. And, although coordination between units during the primary assault had been good, the secondary attack got underway late and the interval between them was unacceptable. All of the heavy artillery was still not in place and coordination between artillery and infantry remained poor resulting in increased casualties. Units close to the Danube continued to encounter heavy fire from Romanian monitors.⁶⁸

During the night of 5-6 September, confusion and depression reigned on the Romanian side of the battle line. Only two forts of the primary line of defense remained in the defender's possession. Virtually all artillery had been lost. Efforts were made throughout the night to improve the city's last, primitive line of resistance. Attempts were also undertaken to reform and reconstitute units that had been battered or had self-destructed. These efforts yielded meager results. The 70th Infantry Regiment, for example, now counted only 22 officers and 350 men. In almost all units, effectives had been reduced by at least 50%. Some could not be reconstituted at all, especially

those whose men had fled the field of battle in panic. Some soldiers had already retreated to the banks of the Danube and were seeking to escape to the other side.⁶⁹ Yet MCG still clung to the hope that more reinforcements or relief expeditions from the east would save Turtucaia. It maintained its edict that the garrison must fight to the last man.⁷⁰

Reinforcements taken from reserves near Bucharest, which had come in dribblets earlier, finally arrived in large numbers during the day and evening of 5 September. A total of 15 battalions of infantry were sent to Turtucaia but little artillery.⁷¹ In quality and morale, they were no better than the garrison itself. At Oltenița, while preparing to cross the Danube, many officers and men had been intimidated by the sounds of battle and by the masses of wounded lying on the waterfront, many unattended. Some of the officers, even one regimental commander, did not continue on to Turtucaia with their men but watched from safety as the disaster unfolded.⁷² These exceptions should not obscure the fact that most of the new arrivals tried to fulfill their obligations. Rushed to Turtucaia before completing mobilization and concentration, units arrived without their support sections. Many came with only the ammunition they could carry. Some of the new arrivals, not met at the docks in Turtucaia, languished there for hours. Others tried on their own to seek out where they were needed. Those who reached the front were often flung into battle hit or miss, without orders and without purpose.⁷³ Under these conditions, reinforcements contributed little to the defense of Turtucaia. Many arrived only in time to be captured.

As confusion reigned within Turtucaia during the night of 5-6 September, Kiselov issued an order to his troops to attack at dawn, "to smash the enemy and throw him into the Danube." At 4:30 AM, his artillery unleashed a "hurricane of shells" in Sectors II and III, followed by the advance of the infantry at 6:00 AM. Romanian defenders began to give ground almost immediately. Bulgarian soldiers, sensing final victory, unsheathed their bayonets and rushed forward to a roar of "hurrahs."⁷⁴ At 9:30 AM, the defenders of Turtucaia experienced a brief moment of hope. A newly assigned airplane, on its first reconnaissance flight, reported a column of infantry and cavalry approaching from the east. Teodorescu assumed

these were the eagerly awaited relief forces from Zaiionchkovskii or Silistra. He immediately ordered a counterattack and urged his men to resist "at any price until the arrival of assistance."⁷⁵ This "relief" column turned out to be a cruel deception. It was, in reality, another Bulgarian force advancing on the city. Zaiionchkovskii's 47th Corps was, of course, still far away and the expedition from Silistra was in the process of being routed. Meanwhile Teodorescu's counterattack to gain time for the arrival of these "helpers," had failed. Although Bulgarian sources affirm that some Romanian units advanced decisively in their final response, it was uncoordinated and without artillery support. It quickly disintegrated with several units fleeing in disorder. Thereafter the Romanians offered no serious resistance as the Bulgarians overran Turtucaia's last line of defense and penetrated the suburbs of the city.⁷⁶ Demoralized and in the grip of panic, Romanian soldiers fled back toward its center. Simultaneously with the failure of the counterattack, Teodorescu learned the truth about the "relief" expedition. At 11:00 AM he telephoned MCG that "the situation is desperate; no hope of aid from Division 9 [Silistra]. Orders requested." The response he received was not to capitulate but that "in no case is the general staff of the fortress to fall prisoner."⁷⁷ At 11:30 AM he dispatched bicyclists with verbal orders for troops to disengage and, as circumstances permitted, to try to save themselves by retreating along the coast toward Silistra. At 1:40 PM Teodorescu arrived at the dock in an automobile and boarded a boat for the other side of the river, as MCG had ordered.⁷⁸

The last hours at Turtucaia were filled with chaos and tragedy. Confused, without adequate leadership, and terrorized at the prospect of falling into the hands of the Bulgarians, the majority of Romanian soldiers were dominated by one thought: escape. Those who tried to follow the coast toward Silistra were beaten back by enemy artillery and attacked by Bulgarian *comitadji* and local citizens.⁷⁹ The majority surged toward the docks seeking a boat to safety. In the words of a naval officer: "Avalanches of men rushed from east and west toward the river.... Human beings in despair, eyes haggard, trembling, seeking a means to cross the river...."⁸⁰ So fierce was the fight to board the few available boats, many became overloaded and sank, drowning their occupants. The more courageous threw themselves

into the water and attempted to swim, clinging to pieces of wood for flotation. All the while enemy shells and shrapnel peppered the water of the Danube. Very few succeeded in conquering the 800 meters of fast-moving water to reach the opposite bank.⁸¹ The crews of Romanian monitors, as they weighed anchor to fight elsewhere, continued to exhort those who remained, by voice and megaphone, to organize an effort to open the road to Silistra. "But it was like speaking to the deaf; they did not move."⁸² As Bulgarian soldiers penetrated the city, cries of Romanian soldiers rose from all quarters: "We surrender," "Throw down arms," "We surrender." "Pieces of white cloth, napkins, and handkerchiefs waved over many heads."⁸³ At 4:30 PM, Colonel Nicolae Mărășescu, the ranking officer remaining, sent a note in German to Kiselov: "I surrender without conditions all my officers, troops, and munitions." His proposal was accepted an hour later. Since only 3500 Romanians had been able to escape, 480 officers and more than 25,000 men entered into two years of harsh captivity.⁸⁴

The Aftermath of Turtucaia

Blame for the disaster at Turtucaia was heaped initially upon Teodorescu, Basarabescu, and Aslan. All three were removed from their commands within 48 hours, their careers ended. It is difficult to defend the first two who had demonstrated that they were incompetent or at least unsuited as field commanders. But Aslan appears to have been a scapegoat. Popular allegations that he wasted his time playing cards at the Jockey Club (which he denied) are irrelevant. The fact remains that his last minute assumption of command denied him any significant influence on the strategy or dispositions in Dobrogea. And, in decisions during the course of the battle at Turtucaia, i.e. evacuation, he was overruled by MCG. Consequently it is upon the latter that the most immediate responsibility must fall for the magnitude of the disaster. The refusal of MCG to consider a strategic withdrawal was based, not on military but on political considerations, especially the impact that the evacuation of Turtucaia would have on public morale. But this inflexibility, which ensured the loss of the garrison as well as the city, served to dishearten the populace, the government and the army even more.