

The rhetoric of Nicolae Iorga concerning Romania's entry in the Great War. The 1914 moment¹

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Abstract

When confronted with the choice of options on how to deal with the outbreak of a war in 1914, Nicolae Iorga took a strong position advocating for moderation and calmness, looking forward to see how the war would unravel, before jumping to massive decisions. His perception of the need to manifest moderation had been justified by the conditions in which the war broke out on the Continent, the lack of resources of the Romanian army, correlated with the need to achieve national prerequisites should the country decide to join the war effort, as well as the need to model the national response to the war in a key that would be consistent with the country's position on a European level.

Keywords: moderation, balance of power, national interest, war effort

Introduction

Romania's position towards the entry in the First World War has been a matter of negotiation and debate both within the country and on the continent. Many of its neighbours considered that should Romania decide to enter the war in 1914, such a decision would most likely shape the future of the war, given the country's decision makers' interests in achieving national unity.

However, the decision on whether to enter the war or remain neutral was a difficult one to take even within the country, as King Charles I would have liked to honour the agreement previously signed with the Central Powers, and enter the war on their side, while the other Romanian decision makers refused such an arrangement and preferred either to remain neutral or join the war effort along with the Entente. Taking such a decision was made even more difficult based on the uncertainty spreading over the continent, as many did not believe that a war would break out, and that the general mobilization would be soon stopped. Unfortunately, this did not occur and Romania, as did other countries, was dragged into a costly war, that would last four long years, and that would on the one hand, drain its

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resources, while on the other it helped putting the country on the way towards achieving national unity.

Among many officials, the stance taken by Nicolae Iorga concerning the country's entry in what would later be termed "The Great War", was a particular one. A historian by profession, as well as a proficient diplomat, Nicolae Iorga had a different grasp of events, and was very much aware of the inevitable changes that could be engendered by an early entry into the war. Instead, he called for moderation and argued in favour of using the neutrality as a means to help develop the country from the military point of view.

The aim of the present article is to draw an overview of Nicolae Iorga's rhetoric concerning the possibility that Romania would join the war in the fall of 1914. His opinions have been extracted from several of his works, speeches, articles written in the "Neamul Românesc" journal, as well as memoirs.

However, an analysis of such a rhetoric is difficult to make in the absence of a perspective of the situation both on the continent and within the country, as all these elements are inter-connected.

The general context of 1914 on the continent

The murder of the Austro-Hungarian Archduke in Sarajevo, together with his wife, in June 1914, by a Serbian student, was the opening point of a series of events that would lead, almost immediately, to war.

Previous to that, the situation in Europe was already one of tension. Between 1912-1913, two Balkan Wars had occurred, which would shortly be among the generating factors of the First World War. At first sight, the Balkan conflicts seemed to involve only local forces; in fact the Balkan Wars have been a stage where all major European Great Powers clashed. Through Serbia, the Austro-Hungarian Empire would target Russia, and in the event in which Tsarist Russia would decide to mobilize its forces, it would entail a reaction from France and Germany on the side of the Austro-Hungarian Empire². Once this war would be set in place, the involvement of Great Britain would be necessary, by virtue of its alliances, and its own need for protection. As the involvement of both France and Germany in the Balkan Wars would be a threat to the naval supremacy of Britain on the continent.

Thus, the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo, on the 28th of June 1914 opened a Pandora's box, which did not represent a break-through for anyone. A conflict in the area was not a surprise, and the assassination served as a pretext for Austria-Hungary to take deep measures against Serbia; such actions might become tragic in the event in which Russia would support its ally³. And they did.

² Vyvyan Brendon, *Primul război mondial*, București, Editura All, 2003, pp. 2-3.

³ Mircea Popa, *Primul război mondial, 1914-1918*, București, Editura Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1979, pp. 151-155.

The major issue to be tackled at the time was the manner in which a future conflict would unravel. Many decision-makers were aware of the fact that should Austria-Hungary attack Serbia, it would determine Russia to enter into the confrontation in order to maintain its influence in the Balkans. Should Russia attack the Austro-Hungarian Empire, then Germany would attack Russia and thus France would have to become involved in the conflict. Furthermore, based on the Entente Cordiale of 1904, Great Britain would also have to join the conflict on the side of France. The beginning of August 1914 was allotted to the mobilization of the army on the German and French side. And although Great Britain was looking forward to playing the role of a mediator, the “August 1st 1914 misunderstanding” forced Britain to join the war. This was due to the fact that Germany attacked France by entering Belgium, whose neutrality needed to be maintained.

Authors such as L.L. Farrar argued that the war was inevitable on account of several factors, such as: the alliance system, nationalism, economic competition and imperialism, an anachronistic diplomacy, domestic issues in some of the countries involved, and the strength of the public opinion which could not be left aside⁴. In addition to that, once the crisis occurred, the choices made by the European decision-making units seemed to be so limited that war was inevitable at the time. As Farrar put it “(these decision-makers) have been somehow programmed for the crisis based on their conceptions on the state system, national goals and their role as statesmen”⁵.

The 1914 state system was a competitive one, with all countries and their decision-makers looking forward to achieve the maximum of opportunities with the minimum of efforts. The decision to go to war or remain neutral was one based on state interest. As a result, the 1914 crisis was a two-fold one, occurring on two levels: the Austro-Serbian one (between June 28th-July 22nd) and the European one (between July 23rd and August 4th). The two levels need to be perceived as inter-connected, as the first one generated the second one.

The first level comprises the negotiation track as well as the ultimatum presented by Austria-Hungary to Serbia. The second level comprises the mobilizations generated among all the other countries that would become party to the conflict, as well as the attempts made by others, such as was the case of Romania, to remain neutral. The inter-connection between these levels is visible in some of the argumentations for war. For instance, Germany preferred an outbreak of the war in 1914, as the Austro-Hungarian Empire was strong and the Franco-Russian preparations for war were incomplete. Moreover, the possibility of Great Britain intervening in the war was less likely in 1914 due to its naval negotiations with Tsarist Russia at the time. In addition to that, the British decision-makers were aware of the fact that the maintenance of the Great Power status depended on the maintenance of the colonial hegemony and the continental balance of power. And many in the London Establishment considered that such a status-quo could be maintained by ensuring peace⁶.

⁴ L.L. Farrar, “The Limits of Choice: July 1914 reconsidered”, in *The Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 16, No. 1, March 1972, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 17.

⁶ *Ibidem*, pp. 21-22.

Unlike the attitude displayed by the Central Powers, most of whom were looking towards war as an absolute solution to the crisis, the British decision-makers were pendulating between three options. The first one was that of taking a strong position against Germany, attempting to negotiate with it in order to prevent it from wrecking the European balance. The second option was the isolationist one, arguing in favour of avoiding any European involvement, unless a direct attack occurred against Great Britain. And the third option was that of keeping Great Britain neutral, on a middle way between isolation and intervention⁷.

The Romanian context in 1914

Similar to the doubts expressed in Great Britain, and the polarisation of the decision-making units among several options, the Romanian decision-makers were pondering whether to fulfil their duty to the Central Powers, with which they had been having an alliance, since 1883 (the agreement with Austria-Hungary), and thus enter the war on their side, or to join the war effort along the side of the Entente. Despite the two years of neutrality embraced by Romania, the spectre of war loomed close by; as Keith Hitchins put it: “the domestic political life during the two years of neutrality had been dominated by the idea of war”⁸.

Furthermore, at the time, Romania was not sufficiently prepared to enter the war, nor was willing to do so. After the Second Balkan War, Romania was among the victors, but its success in the war was not a glorious one, given the lack of military endowment of the Romanian army, as well as its lack of training and expertise. Thus, in 1914, the country was far from being united around a central figure. There was a significant gap between the King and several Germanophiles, on the one hand, who supported the cause of the Central Powers, while the other side comprised the majority of politicians, as well as the public opinion, who were very much in favour of the Entente⁹. However, despite the visible sympathies for one side or the other, both parties considered at the moment, that war should be averted on account of two reasons: the lack of military preparation and the worrying aggression shown by Austria-Hungary to Serbia. The preference for the Entente was also motivated by Ion I. C. Brătianu, the Romanian Prime-minister at the time, by the fact that the country had been relieved of its obligation to help Austria-Hungary, on account of its 1883 treaty due to the fact that the Austro-Hungarian officials had not consulted the Romanian government when addressing Serbia the ultimatum; moreover, argued Brătianu, the character of the ultimatum had been formulated so as to leave Serbia with no choice but to go to war, an action which Romania highly disapproved of¹⁰.

In addition to this, all foreign officials were aware of the fact that Romania’s policy concerning the war would vary depending on its declared national interests. Feld Marshall

⁷ John H. Maurer, *The outbreak of the First World War. Strategic Planning, Crisis Decision-making and Deterrence Failure*, USA, Praeger Publishers, 1995, pp. 101-107.

⁸ Keith Hitchins, *România, 1866-1947*, Bucureşti, Editura Humanitas, 2013, p. 298.

⁹ Anastasie Iordache, *Reorientarea politică a României și neutralitatea armată, 1914-1918*, Bucureşti, Editura Paideia, 1998, pp. 81-97.

¹⁰ Hitchins, *op.cit.*, pp. 294-295.

von Hotzendorf argued that Romania would most likely follow its own path, as it intended to pursue and achieve Transylvania within its borders. For instance, during a meeting between Brătianu and Count Czernin, Brătianu informed him that Romania's policy would be one of expectation, but "should Bulgaria be involved in the conflict and should there be significant changes in the balance of forces between the South-Eastern European states, the situation of Romania would become critical"¹¹, ergo demanding for an action on one side or another. The Bulgarian card has been played by representatives of the Central Powers to a large extent, as they attempted to show Brătianu their availability to satisfy Romania's territorial ambitions, including the recovery of southern Dobruja.

While the Crown Council of August 3rd 1914 resulted in a policy of neutrality for Romania, Brătianu was well aware of the fact that neutrality would not be able to fully protect Romania from the effects of the war. The death of King Charles I on October 10th, 1914, was an alarm signal that Romania needed to act fast and place its allegiance on one side or the other. Thus, Brătianu was looking forward to achieving two major objectives in Romanian foreign policy at the time: to achieve a written guarantee from Germany that Romania will receive Transylvania, Bukovina and Banat as reward for its services (should it join the war) and to settle a separate military convention with Russia, which would establish the cooperation conditions between the two countries, and especially limit the freedom of movement of the Russian troops on Romanian soil¹².

Nicolae Iorga's rhetoric on Romania's stance in 1914

Given the small amount of space available and the largeness of the topic to be approached, our approach to the topic consists of an analysis of several primary sources, such as several parliamentary speeches, memoirs of the war years, articles published in "Neamul Românesc", as well as his analysis of the King's foreign policy until 1914¹³, which have led us to the conclusion that Nicolae Iorga's approach to temperance in 1914, as far as the country's entry in the war was concerned, was justified by the overall perspective the author has on the role and place that Romania should play within the international relations of the continent at the time.

Iorga's preoccupation for fitting Romanian history in the larger context of world history manifests from his very synthetic work – "Geschichte das rumanischen Volkes", published in the early 1900s. In the preface, Iorga emphasizes the fact that he intended to present Romanian history in relation with that of neighbouring peoples, in order for the reader to better understand the influence that neighbouring peoples had on the Romanians, as well as their evolution considered to a be an integrative part of world history¹⁴. His preoccupation for establishing a connection between the history of Romanians and that of the

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 294.

¹² Iordache, *op.cit.*

¹³ These documents have been consulted previous to the current analysis and have not been mentioned here in extenso due to the essay-character of the article, as well as the space allotted to the article. All these shall be mentioned in a different work, a more developed one in the future.

¹⁴ ***, *Nicolae Iorga, Omul si opera*, Iași, Editura Junimea, 1971, pp. 46-47.

peoples from south of the Danube intensified during the Balkan Wars. It was during this period that Iorga intended to reveal the lessons that history had in store for the future evolution of south-eastern Europe and the place that Romania would occupy in the area¹⁵.

Between 1922 and 1923, he delivered two courses in Sorbonne, on the role that tighter contacts with other peoples had on the evolution of Romanians. Especially the first focuses on such aspects, while the second deals more with the French spiritual influence in south-eastern Europe. In his first course he discusses the influences the following had on the history of the Romanian people: the Ancient populations, the Roman and Byzantine Empires, the Ottoman, Austrian and Russian Empires, as well as the influences of the West¹⁶.

In order to highlight the role played by the Romanians in the general evolution of humanity, he wrote his famous work – “La place des Roumains dans l’histoire universelle”. It is here that he claims: “it is not about writing the very history of the Romanians, but rather to place them, in a definitive manner, within global general order, and especially, to indicate the moment and manner in which their influence was exerted over the ensemble”¹⁷.

Moreover, he adds that “the life of a nation is often determined in a decisive, fatal manner, to which it cannot resist, by the geographical position in which it had to develop its existence”¹⁸. As a result, he considers that in order to establish the role of the Romanians within world history, they should not be considered simply from their formation as people, but rather to take into consideration those people which have lived previously on the respective territory.

He also pays great attention to the influence of the West on the Romanian realm. Such influences became visible in the 14th century, from the Hungarian and Polish parts. The penetration of the Ottoman Empire in the area, reduced the extent in which the West could impose its pattern on the area, but such influences were still visible. He differentiates between smaller and larger influences, but he aims to establish the very role played by each.

Furthermore, he highlighted the importance that the Romanians had in the maintenance of the Roman and Byzantine influences in this part of the continent. The fact that the Romanian Principalities had remained autonomous within the Ottoman Empire made them the centre of the Orthodoxy in the Balkans. Thus, the national revival of the south-eastern European populations was, to a large extent, due to the possibilities that their representatives found in the Principalities¹⁹.

There are, however, limitations to Iorga’s analysis. He was an idealist by conception, which led him to over-evaluate the spiritual and political factors. He never considered external factors to be defining for the development of Romanian politics. Foreign policy was, to him, a continuation of domestic policy. All throughout his work, he refers to Romania’s

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p.47.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 49.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

¹⁸ Nicolae Iorga, *La place des Roumains dans l’histoire universelle*, I, București, Editura Institutului de Studii Bizantine, 1935, p.4, p.53.

¹⁹ ***, *Nicolae Iorga, Omul și opera*, ...,p. 59.

foreign policy as defined by either the geographical position, the role of several personalities, or by the era's predominant ideas²⁰. He had a tendency to protect the King, as he considered that Romania's foreign policy was a privilege of the King²¹, which can also be used in order to explain his very moderate approach. Romania's foreign relations at the time were considered to be dominated by the national idea, which he considered to be a necessary and ideal product of the time.

Conclusions

Taking everything into consideration, it seems that the position that Nicolae Iorga advocated for Romania in 1914, that of temperance and expectation was a result of both the general tendencies of the time in the country (which can be perceived as dual, as Iorga contributed, along with other politicians to the establishment of such a tendency), as well as of his overall perspective on the need to approach any of Romania's actions as results of his ample perspective on the role that needs to be allotted to the Romanians in the general context of European history.

Given the reduced amount of space given to this article, the author attempted to discuss the position that Nicolae Iorga took in 1914, which had been visible through a previous reading of its discourses and articles, based on the general context in which the war broke out in 1914 and based on the prerequisites of national interest that needed to be fulfilled, should Romania decide to join the war effort. Naturally, a more extended research is needed, in order to exemplify the moderation that Nicolae Iorga manifested in his approach. Consequently, the present article needs to be perceived in the summing-up manner, one that only launches the full dimension of the research that such a topic entails.

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²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 65.

²¹ Iorga, *La place des Roumains dans l'histoire universelle*, III, p. 153.