

Builders and Martyrs of the Unification of Bessarabia with Romania



Major Vasile Țanțu

(1882-1937)

indefatigable fighter for Romanian spirituality,
a passionate organiser of the Country Council,
a personality that honoured our history

Vasile Țanțu was born on March 1, 1882 in the village of Horodiște, 7 km away from Călărași Railway Station, the richest and most beautiful region of Bessarabia, called Codrii Moldovei (Moldavia's Forests). Until the age of fifteen he lived in his parents' house, learning at the primary school, and in the spring and summer, working in the fields, in the peasants' households of the village, or taking the cattle to pasture crossing the oak and beech forests near the village.

After finishing the primary school, in 1896 he continued his studies at the Agricultural School in the village of Cucuruzeni, the best specialised institution in the south-western part of the Russian Empire. In 1902, at the age of twenty, he received his agronomist diploma and worked in this field for five years, either as an agronomist and or as an administrator on the estate of a landowner in Orhei County [1].

Attracted by pedagogy, he took the exam at the Science High School of Kishinev in 1907, obtained a diploma as teacher in the State's primary schools and a chair in the school of the village of Gherman, in Balti County. In 1908 he was promoted as a school principal and was in office until 1915. In the biography note quoted in his Personal File, it is mentioned that: "...As a teacher, I urged the local authorities to introduce in schools the Moldovan singing and I had the greatest moral satisfaction when the government officials bought Romanian scores for several schools in the county."

In 1908 he met Ion Pelivan, then a judge in Balti, and an ardent patriot defending the cause of Bessarabia's Moldovans, he enrolled in the latte's society and became a promoter of national ideas. On this occasion, the "Tsarist ohranca" began to keep an eye on him considering him a "revolutionary" and searched him both at home and at school to detect what were his contacts with Romania. In 1915 he was 33, married, and had four underage children: Petru (b. 1908), Virginia (b. 1910), Pavel (b. 1912), Mihai (b. 1914) [2]. In the same year, he was mobilised in the Tsarist Army, although it had exceeded the age of recruitment, had a large family and dependent minor children. People, simple Bessarabians, were sent to wars, sacrifices in the interests of the empires, in the interest of foreigners and rich countries. The total mobilisation of the men from Bessarabia between the ages of 19 and 48 had been declared.

From August 1916 Romania participates with two armies in the First World War. The unified German-Bulgarian-Ottoman armies attack Romania. In accordance with the agreement, a significant number of Russian troops, as allied troops, entered the territory of Romania. In 1917, from the northern part of Moldavia to the mouth of the Danube, the Russian Empire participates on the Romanian and Western Front with four armies, namely: the 4th, 6th, 7th and 9th. There are about 300,000 soldiers and Bessarabian military staff enrolled in these armies. Certain sources mention

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100,000 Moldovan soldiers [3]. The newspaper “Ecol Moldovei” (Moldova’s Echo), Iasi, July 24, 1917, says: “...Our Bessarabian brothers are numerous on the Romanian Front. There are Moldovans in each and every regiment, company or platoon.” Bessarabian officers, non-commissioned officers and soldiers in the Russian Army became companions of the Romanian army’s soldiers, many of them even befriended, participated in joint combat missions, shared with their Romanian comrades the harshness of life on the front and in the summer of 1917 paid the blood tribute in the battles of Mărăști, Mărășești, Oituz, Siret, etc.

Teacher Vasile Țanțu was mobilised in the Russian Army as a soldier in the Infantry Battalion 433. To become a commander, he was sent to the Military School in Kiev. He received the rank of second lieutenant, was sent on the Romanian Front, in the 5th Infantry Regiment as company commander. Wounded in the battle of Buzău, after a while he was transferred as a translator officer to the General Staff of the Division deployed in Iasi and obtained the rank of staff captain.

Favoured by his position as commanding officer, he was free to inspect the subordinated military units, got acquainted with Bessarabian officers and soldiers, and established contacts with Romanian army officers. Influenced by the February 1917 Revolution which proclaimed Russia as a democratic country, Captain V. Țanțu mobilised with Moldovan officers and soldiers on the front to find opportunities in Bessarabia’s political interest. Through decrees and governmental decisions the provisional Government of General Al. Kerenski announced the following: equal rights for all citizens, freedom of speech, of press and of conscience, right of association and of public manifestation, and so on. The soldiers acquired equal civil rights with the officers. The equality of the peoples of the former Tsarist Empire and their right to self-determination were also proclaimed [4].

For the army was drafted and signed the Regulation on the establishment of the Command of the Soldiers’ and Officers’ Deputies in the Russian Army; this document was disseminated and implemented on the Romanian Front too.

This dramatic situation of the Russians, “of dissolution of the Empire”, was beneficial to the subjugated peoples. Moldovan officers with minor military ranks and functions took advantage of this historic chance to claim the rights of Bessarabia within the Russian Federation.

Guided by I. Pelivan and Em. Catelli, V. Țanțu organised the patriotic Moldovan officers and soldiers to found a Bessarabian organisation on the Romanian Front.

Most of the Bessarabian officers in the Russian armies on the Romanian Front, including the garrisons of Iași, Bacău, Roman, Galați and others cities, took part in this action.

On April 13, 1917, the initiative group gathered at the Continental Hotel of Iasi, where it discussed the current problems and created the Committee of Iași of Bessarabian soldiers and officers. At this gathering of these Bessarabian soldiers, A. Scobioală was elected President, and V. Țanțu, Secretary. On April 21, 1917, these leaders of the Soldierly Committee of Iași sent a letter to the Moldovan National Party, saying they stood “in solidarity with the actions of the Central Committee of the Moldovan National Party in Kishinev.” The Iași Committee launched appeals via newspapers and leaflets to the Moldovan soldiers from Russian armies, regiments, battalions, companies and platoons, with the following text: “Organise yourselves, stay in touch with us, let us work in good understanding and step in one step! Understand each other, organise yourselves, and enlighten yourselves! Keep this in mind: Where there is only one, there is no power, where there are two, the power increases and the enemy will not thrive” [5].

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Thus, by October 1917, about 60 Bessarabian organizations and committees were formed on the Romanian Front, which supported the activity of the Central Committee of the Soldiers from Kishinev alongside the programme of the Moldovan National Party, which was claiming political autonomy, the official sanctioning of the Romanian-Moldovan language, the creation of the national education and of the national army. All the sixty committees were formed in the Soviets of the soldiers and officers from the Romanian Front, headquartered in Iași.

V. Țanțu participated in the elaboration of the Statute of the Soviet of Moldovan Soldiers and Officers on the Romanian Front, which formulated the following objectives: "...defending the cultural and national interests of Moldovans, based on the principles of freedom, equality and brotherhood; maintaining discipline in the army; training recruits for military service in their mother tongue; active cooperation in changing the form of government of Russia into a republic; allotment of land to the working people in compliance with the norms developed by the future Constituent Assembly of Russia."

The Executive Committee of the Soviet of Bessarabian Soldiers and Officers on the Romanian Front was also supported by the leadership of the Russian Armed Forces (in the documents issued, this structure was also called "The Bessarabian Soldiers' Committee on the Romanian Front", "The Executive Committee of Iași of Moldovan Soldiers and Officers" or "The Central Committee of Bessarabian Soldiers on the Romanian Front", obviously since this was one and the same organisation).

The Committee of Moldovan soldiers of Iași was sending regularly agitators, newspapers and leaflets to all the Russian units on the Romanian Front, urging Moldovan soldiers, most of them sons of peasants, to awake, to enlighten and to organise committees in all military units. V. Țanțu and his colleagues, militaries, called for unification and joint actions with the central organisation in Iași if they wanted to succeed. All these military and patriotic propaganda activities yielded results, many units on the front supporting financially and materially the Soldiers' Committee of Iași, as for instance the 159th Infantry Regiment, the 241st Regiment, the 65th Division, the 3rd Cavalry Division, the 9th Turkestan Regiment, and other units of the Russian Fourth Army gathering and donating 1,000 roubles to the Iași Committee, a considerable sum for that period. Support and adhesion messages came from all Russian military units, from the Baltic Sea to the Danube [6].

During the Russian-Romanian offensive in July 1917, when Romania was in a critical situation, the Bolshevik organisations urged the Russian soldiers to disobey, abandon their fighting positions and boycott the decisions of their Russian commanders. The Moldovan officers from the Committees of the Soldiers, standing in solidarity with their Romanian brothers-at-arms, urged Moldovan soldiers "to fight and sacrifice their lives for the defence of the Romanian Motherland and the Romanian people" [7].

From the Romanian newspaper "Ecoul Moldovei" of July 24, 1917, and other publications, we learn that "the Russian soldiers were leaving their positions at Oituz, whereas small units of Bessarabians remained and fought till their last breath, together with their Romanian brothers." The 14th Russian Division and the Russian Artillery Divisions in Mărășești, formed largely of Bessarabians, also remained unflinchingly on the battlefields [7].

The zemstvo of the gubernia of Kishinev did not carry out any activities to promote national education in schools, and it was always inventing all sorts of impediments so as to keep the old order. The Moldovan National Bloc requested the support of the Bessarabian militaries on the Romanian Front. The Executive Committee of Iași, consisting of the former teachers, V. Țanțu, A.

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Scobioală, I. Buzdugan, etc., empowered these patriotic militaries to compel the zemstvo of the gubernyia to promote in the academic year 1917-1918 the Romanian language written with the Latin alphabet, to open more classes in village schools for the children of peasants and of the soldiers on the front. The Soviet of the Moldovan soldiers and officers from Iași sent to the zemstva military delegates with the following request: "...schools in which the sons of our people might learn the necessary sciences in their mother's sweet tongue [...]. This is the hottest wish in terms of education of the soldiers on the Romanian Front and we ask that it be fulfilled for the good and the happiness of our people so wronged until now, but worthy of a better fate. Signed in the name of the Committee of Soldiers on the Romanian Front, President, Andrei Scobioală, and Secretary Vasile Țanțu", Iași, 30 August, 1917.

An important political action, in which staff captain Vasile Țanțu involved wholeheartedly, was the elaboration of the Declaration of July 12, 1917, which contained a concrete programme whose aim was to obtain the national, territorial and political autonomy, and to found a Supreme Council of Bessarabia in the Country Council. This important document, elaborated in Iași, was sent to the Soldiers' Committees on the Romanian Front and to the Moldovan Central Committee in Kishinev, which asked all Moldovan soldiers to commit themselves as long as they live. The text of the Declaration was published in all the newspapers in Iași, Kishinev and Odessa, was multiplied and sent to all military units and subunits, and disseminated as manifests [8].

In July 1917, a new political formation was created on the Romanian Front, the Moldovan Revolutionary Socialist Party (following the model of the Moldovan National Party in Kishinev). The party was composed only of Moldovan soldiers, and it had a concise and concrete programme. The party was created by the staff captain V. Țanțu and the second lieutenant A. Scobioală. The main theses of the Party were the following: "...the land shall be given free of charge to those who will work it with their arms; schools, churches and Moldovan settlements in the language of our forefathers, "Bessarabia shall no longer be ruled by strangers who do not know our needs, but by people from our country who know our language, our Moldovan misfortunes." In a word, the party was fighting for the widest autonomy of Bessarabia [9].

Enjoying a good reputation in the General Staff of the Russian Army and having the support of General Scerbaciov, staff captain V. Țanțu received permission to travel to Kishinev and Odessa to solve some work-related problems. In fact, on July 23, 1917, V. Țanțu, empowered by the Soldiers' Committee of Iași, together with the sub-deputy Gh. Pântea, convened the meeting of the representatives of the Moldovan soldiers arriving from Odessa and other military garrisons and together they organised the Moldovan Military Central Committee based in Kishinev.

This Moldovan Military Committee will proclaim on 21 October 1917 the autonomy of Bessarabia and in the following days will organise and strengthen the Country Council.

At the Moldovan Military Congress of 20-27 October 1917, captain Vasile Țanțu was elected President of the office which was to organise the Country Council. On November 21, 1917, at the inauguration of the Country Council, he uttered a congratulatory speech. G. Tofan, also present at the event, noted the following: "...officer Țanțu, a Moldovan massive figure, a pleasant and appealing appearance. The core of his speech has a decidedly national colour. A cultivated Romanian – teacher by profession – with profound national beliefs, he speaks a beautiful literary language, has an upright attitude, speaks stirringly and shows the phases through which the issue of the Country Council has passed till its constitution, wishing to achieve its purposes entirely".

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To highlight the above, I shall describe a heroic episode from the life of V. Țanțu, taken from the biographical note. Between January 1-12, 1918, the Bolshevik military organisations and part of the Russian-speaking soldiers of the Front-Otdel launched a campaign, an unprecedented attack against the democratic and national forces in Kishinev, including against the Country Council. It seemed that everything was lost. After a secret meeting with some of the militaries of the Country Council, on the night of January 6, captain V. Țanțu accompanied by a soldier from the Moldovan Regiment left Kishinev clandestinely on horseback, armed and equipped as for war, taking bypass roads, and heading towards the Prut frontier. They rode over a hundred kilometres and arrived in Iași, where they asked the Romanian Army for help. On January 13, 1918, along with the 11th Romanian Division, he participated in the liberation of Kishinev from the Bolsheviks, and helped to restore public order. This is an example of a courageous man, a convinced unionist, devoted to the national cause.

In the Country Council he was a member of the Statements and Statutes Committee, as well as of the Arbitration Commission. He played a major role in the formation of the Moldovan Army. He was sent by the Country Council to Iași to work with the Romanian Army and other State structures, establishing an action plan to help the Moldovan Democratic Republic militarily.

On March 27, 1918, he voted for the Union [10], uttering a moving speech in Romanian: “Gentlemen! I am happy beyond measure when I see that our ideal has been accomplished. I salute the Country Council in the name of those Moldovan heroes who, far from our country, have kept the idea of the Country Council at their breasts. Fighting on the front, we were dreaming of this organ and we were looking forward to it. Because would not come, we soldiers, we decided to come to Kishinev to start the fight for this great exploit... Today, with God’s help we have reached our goal and, having done everything that was possible for the creation of this organ, we hand over its rudder in your hands, so that you direct the boat to the shore where the true children of the Fatherland are eagerly waiting for it. On our part, we wish the Country Council success in its work for the benefit of Bessarabia, so that our brothers on the front can see their native land salvaged from those misfortunes that haunt it today from one end to the other...”

V. Țanțu was a member of Făclia (The Torch) Cultural Society, founded in the summer of 1918. He helped and made great efforts to organise the creation of the Popular University of Kishinev and of Romanian education, contributing to the activity of cultural enlightenment, by writing and publishing articles and a brochure, “Țăranul liber, abecedar politic pentru țărani” (The Free Peasant, Political Basics for Peasants), written in the Cyrillic alphabet.

He was discharged from the Romanian Armed Forces with the rank of major by Decree no. 818 of 28.02.1920. After the Union, V. Țanțu filled State functions, was prefect of a county, then deputy, and later President of the Chamber of Agriculture. For personal reasons, he retired from the big political scene.

Being a modest and honest man, burdened by family concerns and having health problems, in 1932 he retired as a teacher in a small village near his birthplace, in the centre of Moldova, following his initial vocation as school teacher.

For his military and political merits, he was decorated with both Romanian and Russian orders and medals. In 1937, he fell seriously ill, and died in the Central Hospital of Iași on January 30, 1937.

He was buried in the Central Cemetery of Kishinev with military honours.

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With Vasile Țanțu, disappeared one of the most ardent Bessarabian fighters for the achievement of the national ideal – the Union. He loved his country and his people as a great Romanian, this being certified by the fact that he had clandestinely crossed the Prut River several times just “to kiss, said he, the free land of the Fatherland, to see with his own eyes the brothers across the border, to hear their sweet and beautiful language, as well as to fetch from there some Romanian literature, of which Moldovan intellectuals were so thirsty.”

In the Central Cemetery of Kishinev, under two iron beams, placed crosswise, this accomplished energetic fighter and soldier, this politician, who has done so much so that the first Parliament of Bessarabia might open its works and who voted for the Union on March 27, 1918, is sleeping the sleep of the just. The silence to which we condemn him today is an act of great injustice towards this great personality, who honoured our history, fought with the Tsarist regime, fought for the Union but nowadays struggles with... anonymity.

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