



Henri Mathias Berthelot (1861–1931)

The Chief of the Staff of Marshal Joseph Joffre, the supreme Commander of the French troops on the Western Front in the First World War, was sent in the second part of the Great War, since October 1916, at the head of a French military mission, in Romania. It was that vital aid for our country, which was arriving at the eleventh hour. The French Military Mission numbered 277 officers, 88 doctors, pharmacists and veterinarians, 37 pilots and observers, 4 navy officers, 8 intervention officers, and 1,150 NCOs. As it is well known, at the time our country entered the war, the Romanian Army could benefit neither from the transport of weapons from the West – weapons which never reached Romania – nor from the opening of the Balkan front, which would make possible an action on the Romanian front, nor of a consistent support for such a terrible endeavour. In the first part of our Holy War, our brave army fought with whatever it could, witnessing some dramatic moments after the end of the offensive phase in Transylvania, and facing with difficulty an enemy's manoeuvre which was clamping us as in a vice, carried out by some of the most famous armies of West, and led by two of the bravest generals of those times: Erich von Falkenhayn and August von Mackensen.

Arriving here not only with his own experience obtained in the West, but also with a strong team hardened in the great battles on the Western Front, General Berthelot finally brought that extra methodical, strategic, moral and technical oxygen (weapons and means) so much needed by the Romanian army, strongly pressed from the west by the armies of Erich von Falkenhayn and the other enemy forces on this front, and from the south by those of August von Mackensen.

The French military mission decisively contributed to the reorganisation of the Romanian Armed Forces, on the small parcel of land which had remained from our country, and to their thorough preparation for the last great battles that were expecting them, and serving both the vital French interest and the Romanian sacred interest, while the Romanians the Russians were withstanding at the passes in the Carpathians and the Eastern Front up to Galicia.

The French spirit of the Marne and Verdun, the modern armament, the experience and dedication of the chief of the mission, and the tragedy of the Romanian army's withdrawal, found deep resonance in the heart of the Romanian soldier, of King Ferdinand I, of the General Staff, of officers and generals, but especially in the heart of the soldier. For, after all, we are all soldiers. Berthelot proved to be both an exceptional advisor to the King, a comrade of Romanian generals, an extremely powerful negotiator with the Russian

commanders, certainly, defending France's interests, but also those of Romania, a spirit so alive and so close to us that some of our fellow countrymen were saying that he was even more Romanian than the Romanians, and on May 21, 1917, the Parliament granted him, as a token of appreciation and gratitude, the status of honorary citizen of Romania. In just a few months in the first half of 1917, our country's army was reorganised and was ready to face the most powerful enemy it had ever had to confront with. Meanwhile, in the winter and spring months of 1917, in Romania arrived on Russia's railways no less than 2,700 machine guns, 1.37 million grenades, 220,000 rifles, one hundred million cartridges, two million artillery shells and, above all, 199 combat and reconnaissance aircrafts.

In the spring of 1917, according to certain French documents, the Romanian army was counting 492,403 militaries, grouped in two armies: the 1st Army with 9 divisions which was about to be reorganised, and the 2nd Army, commanded by General Alexandru Averescu, composed of 6 divisions. The popularity of the French mission and that of General Berthelot were so great in the Romanian space that many inhabitants of Transylvania and Bukovina came to Iași to enlist and joined the Romanian Army. Berthelot himself welcomed them.

The reorganisation and preparation for battle of the army were completed in June 1917. The offensive planned for the liberation of Muntenia started in the town of Nămolosa, in the south of Moldavia, and two days later the 2nd Army obtained the first victory of 1917, defeating the enemy and conquering the town of Mărăști. On July 25, Kerenski, the provisional ruler of the Russian Government, after the banishment of Tsar Nicholas II, stopped the planned offensive, to the astonishment and indignation of Romanian generals and Berthelot's.

But the war continued. General Berthelot did not lead the military operations on the Romanian front. This mission fell to the Romanian General Staff and to Romanian generals. But he made them possible. And this fact will never be forgotten by the Romanian people.