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Activity of the Special Operation Executive in Romania via Turkey, 1943 - 1944

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Abstract

The Anschluss of March 1938 marks the point at which Hitler's designs for Europe became clearer to Britain and greater prominence was given to considerations about Romania. Between 1938 and 1941 Britain's only weapon against German ambitions in countries which fell into Hitler's orbit were military subversive operations — the destruction of the oilfields and the interdiction of supply routes by the Danube and the rail network — but S.O.E. ((Special Operation Executive) failed. Between 1941 and 1944, the S.O.E. (Special Operation Executive) activity was centred on the revival of wireless contacts with Iuliu Maniu, head of the National Peasant Party, aimed at persuading through him Marshal Ion Antonescu to abandon the Axis and the provision of a channel of communication of armistice terms by the Allies (Autonomous Mission, December 1943). The S.O.E. has taken steps to create a reliable communication channel between S.O.E. residents in Istanbul and Bucharest. A network was made through Turkey legations or through emissaries sent to Istanbul, Ankara and Cairo, or by radio broadcast and by agents launched with parachute.

Keywords: S.O.E., Romanian-Turkish Relations, Oil, Balkans, World War II

1. Introduction

In April 1938, Admiral Sir Hugh Sinclair, the Head of the British Secret Intelligence Service (S.I.S. or MI6), approved the creation of a special unit, Section D (Statistical Research Department of the War Office), which would plan sabotage in enemy-occupied lands.² In October 1938, a small section of the War Office known as G.S.R. (General Staff Research)³ was created. To avoid duplication of effort, the G.S.R. moved into Section D. G.S.R. was placed under the supervision of the Director of Military Intelligence and was renamed Military Intelligence Research (M.I.R.).

Romania began to appear in British calculations about Hitler's intentions in Central and Eastern Europe after the *Anschluss* of March 1938.⁴ The British concluded that their only weapon against German ambitions in countries which fell into Hitler's orbit were military subversive operations.

The British had better contacts and influential places in Romania than anywhere else in South-East Europe, except perhaps Greece. Yet, because Romania was geographically inaccessible and because Stalin made it clear from the start that he intended to secure a dominant position, their contacts could never be properly used.⁵

M.I.R. recognized that Romania's oil was particularly tempting to Hitler and considered the problem under two topics – destruction of the oilfields and the interdiction of supply

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² Nigel West, *MI6: British Secret Intelligence Operations, 1909–45,* London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1983, p. 60.

¹³ Peter Wilkinson, Joan Bright Astley, *Gubbins and SOE*, London: Pen and Sword, 1997, p. 34.

⁴ Dennis Deletant (ed.), *In and Out of Focus: Romania and Britain. Relations and Perspectives from 1930 to the Present*, Bucharest: British Council, 2005, p. 71–86.

⁵ Elisabeth Barker, *British Policy in South-East Europe in the Second World War*, Macmillan Press, London, 1976, p. 223.



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routes by the Danube and the rail network. Explosive material was introduced into Romania by various means, including the diplomatic bag, using the Istanbul channel.

At the European level, Romania was the second largest producer, its oil reserves being surpassed only by those of the Soviet Union.

In July 1940, in response to defeat in continental Europe, M.I.R. and Section D were merged with Electra House (propaganda section of the Foreign Office) to form SO2 (Special Operations 2), part of the Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.) created in that month on Churchill's orders with the motto "to set Europe ablaze".

In Romania, the attempt to set the country ablaze had been largely extinguished by the failure of operations to blow up the oil wells. SO2 now turned its attention to building an anti-German resistance within the country. With the consolidation of Romania's alignment with Germany after general I. Antonescu's advent to power in September 1940, SO2 concentrated on developing contacts with pro-British members of the political opposition.

Colonel Bill Bailey, SO2 representative in Istanbul, sent a policy statement to headquarters dated 21 December 1940 upon which he based his discussions with the British Minister Sir Reginald Hervey Hoare⁶ in Bucharest on the agency's plan to create a local pro-Ally organization comprising the residue of Iuliu Maniu's party, dissident Iron Guardists, and "other suitable elements".⁷ The withdrawal of the British Legation meant that there was no S.O.E. officer to coordinate any sabotage action by the Romanians⁸, so they moved their office in Istanbul. For almost three years radio and occasional courier were the means of contact with Romania.⁹ In an attempt to keep abreast of developments in Romania, both de Chastelain¹⁰ and Gibson¹¹ met Romanians passing through Istanbul at a club called Taxim, or contacts with Romanian diplomats.

⁶ In 1934, he was appointed Extraordinary Envoy and Minister plenipotentiary to Romania and began serving in 1935. Reginald Hoare was withdrawn from Romania in 1941.

⁷ Dennis Deletant, British Clandestine Activities in Romania during the Second World War, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 78. Maurice Pearton, British Intelligence in Romania, 1938–1941, in George Cipăianu, Virgiliu Târău (eds), Romanian and British Historians on the Contemporary History of Romania, Cluj-Napoca University Press, Cluj-Napoca, 2000, p. 202.

⁸ Maurice Pearton, British Policy Towards Romania: 1939–1941, in Dennis Deletant, Maurice Pearton (eds), *Romania Observed, ed. Enciclopedică, București,* Bucharest: Editura Enciclopedic, 1998, p. 94.

⁹ Dennis Deletant, British Clandestine Activities in Romania during the Second World War, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, p. 83. Ivor Porter, Operation Autonomous: With SOE in Wartime Romania, London: Chatto and Windus, 1989, p. 66.

¹⁰ Alfred George Gardyne de Chastelain (1906-1974) studied engineering at London University. On 4 November 1927, he joined Unirea (Phoenix Oil and Transport Company) in Bucharest. His expertise led to his recruitment by MIR in operations to sabotage the oil wells in Ploiești but attacks by the Iron Guard on the British engineers involved in these plans forced him to leave Romania in October 1940. In 1941, he took over from Colonel Bill Bailey as head of SOE in Istanbul. Parachuted into Romania in December 1943 as head of the *Autonomous* mission he was captured and interned in Bucharest until 23 August 1944. On the following day he flew to Istanbul, *cf.*, Dennis Deletant, *British Clandestine Activities...*, p. XII.

¹¹ In February 1941, Harold Charles Lehr Gibson was sent to Istanbul as head of station. Here he had responsibility not only for Turkey but also had to coordinate the work of the displaced in Athens, Belgrade, Bucharest, Budapest and Sofia stations. At the same time Harold Gibson contributed to the Inter Service Balkan



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The most active of neutral diplomats was a Turkish citizen named Satvet Lutfi Tozan, an arms dealer and honorary Finnish Consul in Istanbul. In November 1941, Tozan met Iuliu Maniu and Mihai Popovici in the house of the Turkish Ambassador, Suphi Tanriöver, in Bucharest. Lutfi Bey was at this time collaborating in Istanbul with Commander Vladimir Wolfson of Royal Naval Intelligence.¹²

The following day after Britain's declaration of war Marshal I. Antonescu, who had served as military attaché in London and had a great admiration for Britain, expressed regret in a radio broadcast that his people's centuries-old struggle to preserve its existence, its liberty and its unity had not been understood.¹³

Interruption of Romanian oil production remained a priority for the Allies. The first air raids on the oilfields at Ploiești were carried out by Soviet aircraft between July 1 and August 18 1941, but they appear to have caused little damage.¹⁴

In 1942, the Foreign Office and S.O.E. agreed upon that I. Maniu is "our best hope of starting an anti-Axis movement and that a *coup d'état* would be the goal to aim at".¹⁵

2. The Turkish Chanel in the Romanian Secret Negotiations to go out of War (1st of February 1943 - 23rd of August 1944)

The German retreat after the battle of Stalingrad in November 1942 was a turning point for the German advancement in Europe. Starting with that moment, the Anglo-Americans started building upon the idea of launching a Balkan invasion throughout Turkey and weakening the German army by creating a second front in Europe.

Mihai Antonescu¹⁶ looked toward the neutral states also, trying to establish direct contact with the western representatives. The Romanian minister in Bern, N. E. Lahovary, was instructed to contact Vatican's ambassador Bernardini, while he was negotiating with the ambassador in Romania, A. Cassulo. Meanwhile, the Romanian Foreign Affairs Minister in Lisbon, V. Cădere, enquired the Portuguese Prime Minister, Salazar, the British ambassador, and the minister in Madrid, while N.G. Dimitrescu renewed his contact with the Argentinean ambassador, Pereira, asking them to be intermediaries and address the American ambassador,

Intelligence Centre (a cover name for MI6) which had been set up in Ankara in December 1939 under the direction of the military attaché, Brigadier Allan Arnold, *cf.*, Dennis Deletant, *British Clandestine Activities...*, p. 4-5.

¹² Dennis Deletant, British Clandestine Activities..., p. 89.

¹³ Mircea Agapie and Jipa Rotaru *Ion Antonescu: Cariera militară. Scrisori inedite,* ed. Academiei de Înalte Studii Militare, București, 1993, p. 177. *apud* Dennis Deletant, *British Clandestine Activities...*, p. 91.

¹⁴ Patrick Macdonald *Through Darkness to Light: The Night Bomber Offensive against Romanian Oil,* 1944, Edinburgh: The Pentland Press, 1990, p. 33.

¹⁵ Elisabeth Barker, British Policy in South-East Europe ..., p. 224.

¹⁶ Mihai Antonescu was Minister of Foreign Affairs (29 June 1941 – 23 August 1944) and Minister of National Propaganda (26 May 1941 – 23 August 1944).



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Carlton Hayes "Romania's wish to make peace with the United Nations as soon as possible".¹⁷

There was also a close connection between Mihai Antonescu and Turkey's representative, Suphi Tanriöver, the Romanian government having high hopes concerning the role that the Turkish government could assume.

On the other hand, at the end of 1942 and the beginning of 1943 there were further contacts between the *Romanian democratic opposition* and the Anglo-Americans *via* SOE's channel in Istanbul.

The efforts made by the Romanian government to remain in contact with the Western powers had reached a new level. Thus, on 13 January 1943, Marshal I. Antonescu sent a message to the military attaché from Turkey to convey to the American military attaché that the collaboration with the Allies is conditioned by political guarantees. Romania cannot follow Italy's example, since that would mean the occupation of its territory by the Russian army. If the British and the American army came to the Danube, the Romanian army would fight next to the Dniester River and it would fight off the Red Army.

Within a month of the Tehran Conference Romania began to influence strategic decision-making. A second S.O.E. mission to Romania had been planned in spring 1943. On 9 November 1943, Iuliu Maniu notified to the British that he wished to send a special delegate out of Romania, in order to discuss arrangements for a political change in that country. After consultations with Moscow and Washington, London agreed, notifying to the leader of the P.N.Ţ.¹⁸ that the emissary's only function was to discuss the operational details for the overthrow of Antonescu's regime and its replacement with a government ready to accept unconditional surrender.¹⁹ De Chastelain and I. Porter were accompanied by a Romanian sabotage expert, Silviu Mețianu and on 22 December 1943, the three men were dropped in thick mist and were captured a few hours after the parachuting by Romanians.²⁰

What the Romanians did not know about the *Autonomous Mission* is that the British used contacts with the opposition and the Romanian government to confuse the German army. The operation was codenamed "Bodyguard" and managed to persuade the Germans to maintain troops in the Balkans to allow the Allies to land in Normandy.²¹

3. Prince Barbu Știrbey's voyage to Egypt *via* Turkey (March 1944)

The Romanian opposition and Marshal Antonescu agreed that prince Barbu Știrbey should be sent to London for secret meetings with the British government, given his excellent

¹⁷ Aurel Simion *Preliminarii politico-diplomatice ale insureției române din august 1944*, ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1979, p. 269.

¹⁸ Iuliu Maniu was the Leader of the National Peasants' Party (Partidul Național Țărănesc = PNŢ).

¹⁹ P. Quinlan, *Ciocnire deasupra României. Politica anglo-americană față de România (1938-1947)*, Fundația Culturală Română, Iași, 1995, p. 84.

²⁰ Ivor Porter, *Operation Autonomous* ..., p. 78.

²¹ F. H. Hinsley, G. A. G. Simkins, *British Intelligence in the Second World*, volume 4, Her Majesty's Stationery Office, London, 1990, p. 239.



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relations with Great Britain. On 1 February 1944, Alexandru Cretzianu, the Romanian minister in Ankara, was informed by the British government that there would a meeting between the three main Allied powers in Cairo.

In spite of this major change of events, prince Stirbey left Romania for Istanbul on 1st of March 1944 with a mission from I. Maniu and with I. Antonescu's approval. His destination and the scope of the visit were kept a secret, the justification for the Germans being that he has to buy some cotton (Stirbey owned a factory that processed cotton). Even though the declared scope seemed legitimate, the Germans realized that he has a secret mission. The Germans could have stopped him at "the Turkish-Bulgarian border, in Svilengrad, but they wanted to avoid any complications with the Romanian authorities".²² Instead, the Gestapo arrested Stirbey's daughter who was joining him, hoping that he will not continue his journey. Prince Stirbey did not let this intimidate him and continued his journey.

Once he reached Ankara, the British Secret Services gave him a passport with the name Bond and he left for Cairo. In spite of the efforts made to keep the visit a secret, on 14 March 1944, Reuters published the news that "a Romanian emissary, prince Știrbey, has left Istanbul to begin the negotiations in Cairo".²³ In addition, Prince Știrbey's trip was leaked to the Turkish press, making his mission more difficult.²⁴ Even though the Romanian government declared that this was a private visit, the negotiations between the prince and the western representatives began under unfavourable conditions.

On 17 March 1944, Prince Stirbey started the negotiations with the Allied representatives: lord Moyen (member of the British government residing in the Middle East), Mac Veagh and Novikov, the American and the Russian ambassadors in Egypt.²⁵

La Turquie newspaper mentioned in the article "The Romanian opportunities" from 29 March 1944 the conditions offered to Romania and Finland by Russia:

"The border established in 1940 (the retreat from Bessarabia and Bucovina); The north arm of the Danube and of Sulina; Romania should defeat the Germans; Russia will take actions during the peace conference that Romania should be given the north of Transylvania; the occupation of several cities by the Russians; Romania should give back the industrial equipment built in the occupied regions; the rendition of those who committed war crimes against the Russians."²⁶

On 20 June 1944, Iuliu Maniu sent a message to Alexandru Cretzianu containing detailed plans for the coup d'etat that would lead Romania to the United Nations camp. For the success of the action, Iuliu Maniu asked the U.S.S.R. to undertake a vigorous offensive on the Romanian front and to send to the Anglo-Americans three airborne brigades, in some vital

²² A. Cretzianu, op. cit., p. 140.

²³ Idem

²⁴ Cumhuriyet Newspaper (16 March 1944): Rumanyanı sulh şartları. Ankaradaki Rus mahfillerine göre Prens Şrtirbey'in teşebbüsü bir Alman oyunu imiş; Cumhuriyet Newspaper (18 March 1944): Rumanyanın sulh teşebbüsü. Kahireye giden Prens Ştirbey muhalefetin mümesili mi?

²⁵ A. Cretzianu, *op. cit.*, p. 140.

²⁶ AMAE, fund 71/Turcia [Turkey], volume 64, p. 23.



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points around Bucharest.²⁷ Iuliu Maniu decided that General Aldea should cross the front line and treat the conditions of the armistice with the Russians. The crossing of the lines was to take place on the night of August 8-9, 1944. The operation did not take place due to the resumption of fighting.²⁸ In turn, the government was in advanced negotiations in Stockholm with the Soviet ambassador, Mrs. Kolontai.²⁹

On 20 August 1944, when Soviet pressure on the front rose, Iuliu Maniu sent to Cairo that he had decided to act without waiting for a response from the Allies.³⁰ In addition, Mihai Antonescu asked Turkey to act as an intermediary between Romania and the Allies for the conclusion of the armistice, with the consent of the king, the marshal and all members of the opposition. He wanted to know which of the three alternatives were convenient for the Anglo-Americans: sending a Romanian representative to Moscow to conclude the armistice; simultaneous contact with the Americans, the British and the Russians to establish the terms of an armistice; or discussing the terms of the armistice in Cairo with the Allies.³¹

On 23 August 1944, Romania had no other solution than to side with the United Nations and saved what could be saved. On the afternoon of August 23, Marshal I. Antonescu and his main collaborators were arrested. With or without 23 August 1944, Romania was still occupied by the Red Army, as a result of the Tehran agreements.

As a conclusion, if the success of British military clandestine activities in Romania is to be judged by their effectiveness in fulfilling their principal purpose — the destruction of the oilfields and the interdiction of supply routes by the Danube and the rail network — then the verdict can only be one of failure.³² Although in the period from 1940 to 1944 there were a few isolated rail accidents, fires and explosions which might have been ascribed to sabotage, the importance of these in the context of oil production and export to the Reich from Romania was minimal. In fact, the battle for "the black gold" waged by the *Abwehr*³³ with the British and French intelligence agencies was won in 1940.

Secondly, during the 1941-1944 period S.O.E. activity in Romania has depended on the collaboration with Iuliu Maniu. S.O.E. has taken steps to create reliable communication channels between S.O.E residents in Istanbul and Bucharest. Networks were made through the Turkish legations or through emissaries sent to Istanbul, Ankara and Cairo, or by radio

²⁷ Reuben Markham, *România sub jug sovietic*, Fundația Academia Civică, București, 1996, p. 89.

²⁸ I. Ardeleanu, V. Arimia, M. Muşat (eds.), 23 August 1944. Documente, vol. II, ed. Științifică și Enciclopedică, 1984, p. 346.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p.374.

³⁰ I. Porter, *op. cit.*, p. 232.

³¹ I. Ardeleanu, V.Arimia, M. Muşat (eds.), 23 August 1944..., pp. 413 – 414.

³² Dennis Deletant, *British Clandestine Activities...*, pp. 66-89.

³³ Ottmar Trașcă, Dennis Deletant, *The German Secret Services in Romania: "Kriegsorganisation Rumänien"/"Abwehrstelle Rumänien" and Intelligence Cooperation between Romania and Germany over the Defence of the Romanian Oil-Fields, 1939–1944, in Daniel Dumitran, Valer Moga (eds), Economy and Society in Central and Eastern Europe: Territory, Population, Consumption*, Papers of the International Conference held in Alba Iulia, 25–7 April 2013 (Vienna/Zurich/Munich: Lit Verlag), 2013, pp. 343–62.



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broadcast and by agents launched by parachute.³⁴ These channels were functioning with benefit from the help of the Romanian Secret Services, which tolerated their activity.

S.O.E. asked Iuliu Maniu to launch a coup d'etat in Romania in the autumn of 1943 and the spring of 1944, although Britain was not interested in its success. The British were interested in the success of the Bodyguard operation.³⁵

The regime change of August 23, 1944 was a severe blow to Germany, which was forced to abandon the Balkans and withdraw its armies to Hungary. At the end of August, the Soviets crossed Romania and Bulgaria and stopped at the Balkan door of Turkey.

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³⁴ cf. Autonomous Mission.

³⁵ Terry Crowdy, *Deceiving Hitler: Double-Cross and Deception in World War II*, Osprey Publishing, 2008.



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Appendices

Appendix-1: Sir Reginald Hervey Hoare, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to Romania, was withdrawn from Romania in 1941.



Akşam Newspaper (17 February 1941)





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Tan Newspaper (17 February 1941)



Vatan Newspaper (17 February 1941)





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Akşam Postası Newspaper (17 February 1941)





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Appendix-2: Evolution of the Romanian Oil Production from 1938 to 1945³⁶

Year	Total Production	Domestic Consumption	Export
	— in tons —	— in tons —	— in tons —
1938	6, 610, 000	1, 647, 046	4,159,325
1939	6, 240,000	1,784,750	3,848,403
1940	5,810,000	1, 862, 000	3,192,523
1941	5, 453,000	1, 810, 887	3, 683 ,028
1942	5, 665, 000	2, 097, 053	2 ,947,334
1943	5, 273,000	2,007,005	2,797 ,616
1944	3, 525, 000	1, 108, 148	1, 338,681
1945	4, 680, 000	1, 443, 852	185, 997

³⁶ Ilie Manole, Constantin Hlihor (eds.), Armata Roșie în România, București, 1995, pp. 158-160, apud Gh. Buzatu, Istoria petrolului românesc/ History of Romanian Oil, Ed. Demiurg, Iași, 2009, p. 460.



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Appendix-3: The Winter Campaign, December 1943-April 1944³⁷

The Soviet offensive (Operation Iași- Chișinău) began on 20 August 1944 with the forces of the armies of the Ukrainian Fronts 2 and 3, under the command of General R. Malinovsky and General F. Tolbuhin. On August 21, Soviet troops captured the city of Iași and began advancing on Bucharest. The front of the German-Romanian forces was collapsing.



³⁷ David M. Glantz, *The Soviet-German 1941-1945: Myths and Relities: ASurvey Essay*, The Strom Thurmond Institute of Government and Public Affairs Clemson University, 2001, p. 68.