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Y. MOURÉLOS, *Le Front d'Orient dans la Grande Guerre: enjeux et stratégies* • A. D'ALESSANDRI, *Italian Volunteers in Serbia in 1914* • M. KOVIĆ, *The British Adriatic Squadron and the Evacuation of Serbs from the Albanian Coast 1915–1916* • M. MILKIĆ, *The Serbian Army in the Chalkidiki in 1916: Organization and Deployment* • D. FUNDIĆ, *The Austro-Hungarian Occupation of Serbia as a "Civilizing Mission" (1915–1918)* • S. N. DORDANAS, *German Propaganda in the Balkans during the First World War* • D. CAIN, *Conflicts over Dobruja during the Great War* • T. KREMPP PUPPINCK, *De la Grèce rêvée à la Grèce vécue. L'armée d'Orient dans une interculturelité complexe* • V. G. PAVLOVIĆ, *Franchet d'Espèrey et la politique balkanique de la France 1918–1919* • S. G. MARKOVICH, *Eleftherios Venizelos, British Public Opinion and the Climax of Anglo-Hellenism (1915–1920)* • D. BAKIĆ, *The Great War and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia: The Legacy of an Enduring Conflict* • I. D. MICHAILIDIS, *A Ten Years' War: Aspects of the Greek Historiography on the First World War* • R. THEODORESCU, *What Exactly did Romanian Post-War Nationalism Mean?* • V. VLASIDIS, *The Serbian Heritage of the Great War in Greece* • F. ȚURCANU, *Turtucaia/Toutrakan 1916 : la postérité d'une défaite dans la Roumanie de l'entre-deux-guerres* • E. LEMONIDOU, *Heritage and Memory of the First World War in Greece during the Interwar Period: A Historical Perspective* • D. DUŠANIĆ, *Du traumatisme au roman. Mémoire et représentation de la Grande Guerre dans l'œuvre de Rastko Petrović (1898–1949)* ☞

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Conflicts over Dobruja during the Great War

Abstract: A sensitive topic for decades (for ideological reasons), Dobruja is still a challenge for many Romanian and Bulgarian historians. A peripheral and hardly populated region, this territory lying between the Danube and the Black Sea became the major source of dispute between Bucharest and Sofia at the dawn of the last century. After 1878, legal history and statistics were the pillars of the new identity of this former Ottoman territory divided between Romania and Bulgaria, as a result of a decision made by the Great Powers. In order to meet the specific requirements of young national states, Dobruja underwent a colonisation process (whose intensity differed in the two parts of the region). Ethnic diversity caused much concern, particularly in the critical moments that endangered the relations between the two neighbouring countries. The Balkan Wars represented the moment when the Dobruja question officially emerged. Romania's decision to annex Southern Dobruja would traumatise Bulgarian society, which would look forward to retaliating. This moment occurred earlier than many Romanian politicians expected. The spirit of revenge explains why the fighting on the Dobrujan front was so intense in the autumn of 1916. Dobruja was the first province of the Romanian Kingdom that fell under the Central Powers' occupation. The documents stored in Romanian archives are too few to make it possible to accurately reconstruct the history of this province during its military occupation by the Central Powers. This is not an easy challenge: Romania, Bulgaria, Russia, Serbia, Germany, Turkey and Austro-Hungary were in some way involved in the events in Dobruja in the autumn of 1916.

Keywords: Dobruja, Bulgaria, Romania, First World War, military occupation, minorities, territorial disputes

Only a few days after Romania had entered the Great War, Dobruja became the Romanian army's Achilles' heel. For the Bucharest authorities the territory between the Danube and the Black Sea had to play a secondary role in the unfolding of the military campaign. Blinded by the image of a poorly defended Transylvania, Romanian politicians and generals relied too much on the aid they had been expecting from their new allies in order to secure the border with Bulgaria. A potential offensive triggered by the Allied Army of the Orient on the Salonika Front and the deployment of Russian troops in Dobruja were thought to be enough to immobilize the Bulgarians who, like Romanians, were facing

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the same option of a two-front-war.¹ The experience of the Second Balkan War definitely played an important role in making such a decision. First of all, we can say that Romania's supremacy in the Balkans was an illusion if we think of it as the arbiter of this part of Europe. Its southern territorial expansion was seen as the first step in fulfilling its national ideal. Deprived of the possibility to gain real experience on the battlefield, the Romanian army had the ill luck of becoming part of a triumphalist discourse. The flaws noticed during its short campaign in Bulgaria were simply overlooked. The price paid for its success was the only thing that stirred the interest of public opinion.² Consequently, the strategy adopted by the Romanian government comes as no surprise after the outbreak of the Great War: repeating the tactics employed in 1913, yet at a larger scale. According to this scenario, maximal success was to be achieved with a minimum of sacrifice. However, this plan was marred by the fast and intense answer given by the Central Powers. The lack of experience on the battlefield was a crucial factor: the panic caused by the first blows on the Dobruja front put an end to the offensive in Transylvania and finally led to the transformation of the 1916 Romanian campaign into a disaster. Some explanations that can still be found in Romanian historiography help us understand what happened on the Dobruja front in the autumn of 1916: the Russian troops' lack of reaction and the allies' refusal to fulfil the commitments undertaken by the military convention with Romania.³ Blaming the allies for the Romanian army's defeat in the autumn of 1916 needs a much more nuanced approach to what a coalition war means. Western historians are straightforward: Romania did not join the Great War so as to help its allies, but to pursue its national interest.⁴ The reality of this simple truth was most harshly experienced by the Serbian kingdom. While waiting for the right moment to enter the war, Romania preferred to forget about its commitments undertaken by the Treaty of Bucharest in August 1913. The Romanian govern-

¹ The Military Convention signed with the Entente on 4/17 August 1916 compelled Romania to declare war against Central Powers on 15/28 August 1916, at the latest. During this period, its new allies had to launch an offensive both on the Salonika Front and in Bukovina. Also, to counteract the Bulgarian danger Russia committed itself to deploying three divisions in Dobruja. For further details about Romania's entry into the Great War, see Glenn E. Torrey, *Romania and World War I. A Collection of Studies* (Iași/Oxford/Portland: Center for Romanian Studies, 1998), 95–153.

² See Daniel Cain, "L'illusion de la suprématie dans la Péninsule Balkanique: le Royaume de Roumanie entre le Traité de Bucarest et Sarajevo (août 1913 – juin 1914)", *Revue des études sud-est européennes* LII (2014), 171–192.

³ Comisia Română de Istorie Militară [The Romanian Commission of Military History], *România în anii Primului Război Mondial* [Romania in the First Years of the First World War], vol. II (Bucharest: Editura Militară, 1987), 578.

⁴ Michael B. Barrett, *Prelude to Blitzkrieg. The 1916 Austro-German Campaign in Romania* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 304.

ment's policy was clear: the disputes between its Balkan neighbours were not a sufficiently serious reason to renounce its neutral status. Prime minister Ion I.C. Brătianu was aware that Romania's interests could not always be the same as those of some countries like Serbia or Greece.⁵ Moreover, though part of the same camp, Serbia was excluded from the talks held by Brătianu over Romania's entrance into the Great War. The Great Powers' acknowledgement in writing of as many territorial claims of Romania as possible was crucial to Brătianu.⁶ During the Paris Peace Conference, the absence of direct negotiations with the Serbian government during the entire year of 1916 led to the emergence of disputes over the division of Banat.⁷

In the autumn of 1916, Dobruja unquestionably became a bloody theatre which involved civilians too. Romanians, Russians and Serbians fought side by side on this initially 140-km-long front against the Bulgarian, German, Turkish and Austro-Hungarian troops. Irregular fighting and excesses against the civilian population occurred during the four months of war in Dobruja. Exacerbated nationalist feelings explain the atrocities committed on both sides during these months of war waged on the Dobruja battlefield. History provides an explanation for this matter of fact. A border region with a mixed population, Dobruja became a territory disputed between Romania and Bulgaria at the beginning of the past century, as long as the Balkan borders began to change. For the Bucharest authorities Bulgaria gradually began to be viewed as a problematic state, as well as a competitor to Romania's supremacy in the region. The rift between the two states was caused by the Romanian government's decision to take advantage of Bulgaria's military and diplomatic difficulties in order to modify their common border in Romania's own interest in the summer of 1913. The need for a strategic border with Bulgaria was brought into discussion in order to justify the annexation of Southern Dobruja (nearly 8,000 km² in area). Even if Romanians amounted to 5 per cent of the population of the new territory (estimated to nearly 300,000 inhabitants, particularly Turks and Bulgarians),⁸ people in Bucharest were hopeful of the successful integration of this region into the Ro-

⁵ I. G. Duca, *Amintiri politice* [Political Memoirs], vol. II (Munich: Jon Dumitru Verlag, 1981), 25.

⁶ Keith Hitchins, *Ion I.C. Brătianu. Romania* (London: Haus Publishing Ltd., 2011), 82.

⁷ Sherman David Spector, *Romania at the Paris Peace Conference* (New York: Bookman Association, Inc., 1962), 123–126.

⁸ George Georgescu, *Județul Caliacra din punct de vedere administrativ, financiar, economic, social și cultural* [Caliacra County from an Administrative, Financial, Economic, Social and Cultural Point of View] (Bucharest: Institutul de Arte Grafice Carol Göbl, 1915), 3; Ion N. Cămărășescu, *Durostorul. Expunerea situațiunei județului la 1 decembrie 1914* [Durostor. The County's State of Affairs on 1 December 1914] (Bucharest: Tipografia Ion C. Văcărescu, 1915), 20.

manian Kingdom. The manner in which Northern Dobruja was colonized and transformed after 1878, when it was annexed to Romania by the Congress of Berlin, fuelled the Romanian authorities' trust in the success of their mission.⁹ Therefore, an exceptional regime was the solution for this new Romanian territory. The Romanian Parliament held open discussions of the different issues when the two parts of Dobruja were annexed. Take Ionescu, former minister of the interior, provides a necessary explanation: in 1878, we annexed a Turkish province with a rare population. In 1913, we received a strip of land with a population that led a constitutional life for three decades. As a result, warns Ionescu, we should show those whom we uprooted from their homeland that we are superior to their former sovereigns by our tolerance and civilization.¹⁰

Despite the Bucharest authorities' optimistic attitude, the territory annexed by Romania in the summer of 1913 proved to be a real time bomb, not only because of the feelings experienced by the Bulgarian minority, but also of the feelings of rage and revenge the Romanian campaign across the Danube provoked in Bulgarian society. Shortly afterwards, Romania was to be perceived as a treacherous neighbour that deprived Bulgaria of the possibility to harvest its victories won during the First Balkan War.¹¹ Resentments escalated until the armies of the two countries faced each other on the battlefield. In the autumn of 1915, the decision of Bulgaria to join the Central Powers enhanced the Romanian government's distrust. All the war plans drafted by the Romanian General Headquarters both before 1913, and particularly between 1914 and 1916, considered Bulgaria a hostile state.¹² Special attention was paid to the monitoring of Bulgarian propaganda among the inhabitants of Southern Dobruja.¹³

In November 1915, prime minister Ion I.C. Brătianu approved a detailed action plan that had to be put into execution by the Romanian authorities in the territory annexed after the end of the Second Balkan War, in the event of a war with Bulgaria. Essentially, the plan contained the steps that the civil and mili-

⁹ See Constantin Iordachi, "The California of the Romanians: Integration of Northern Dobrogea into Romania, 1878–1913", in Balázs Trencsényi et al., eds., *Nation-building and Contested Identities: Romanian and Hungarian Case Studies* (Budapest/Iași: Regio Books/Polirom, 2001), 121–152.

¹⁰ *Desbaterile Adunării Deputaților* [The Deputy Assembly Debates], Sesiunea ordinară 1914 [Ordinary Session], no. 30/29 March 1914, ședința din 27 martie 1914 [meeting of 27 March 1914], 400, 404.

¹¹ Anastas Ishirkov, *Küsi napütini belezhki vürhu Dobrudzha i Moravsko* (Sofia 1917), 16.

¹² Ministerul Apărării Naționale [The Ministry of National Defence], *România în Războiul Mondial* [Romania in the Great War], vol. I (Bucharest: Imprimeria Națională, 1934), 83–84.

¹³ See, e.g., Arhivele Naționale ale României [National Archives of Romania], Serviciul Arhive Naționale Istorice Centrale [The Central Historical National Archives Department, hereafter SANIC], Direcția Poliției și Siguranței Generale [Police and General Security Division], files 132/1914, 556/1914, 243/1915.

tary authorities from Southern Dobruja had to follow during the week before the Romanian army was to be mobilised. The plan aimed to put in requisition all that was deemed as necessary for the army's needs (animals, food products, transportation means). They had to be shipped over to the other side of the Danube. Also, all the suspects had to be detained and then deported along with "all men of foreign nationality aged between 18 and 60" who lived in the area of Romanian fortresses. The remaining population (women, elderly people and children) had to be warned over the consequences of "any act of hostility or treason" for the Romanian troops. More specifically, not only the culprits, but also their relatives would pay with their life.¹⁴ The events that unfolded in August 1916 show that the Romanian authorities enforced the measures that had been agreed upon nine months before.¹⁵ Official statistics say that between August 1916 and April 1918 the Romanian government decided to intern about 38,000 civilians. There were three categories of civilians interned by the Romanian authorities: those who held the enemy states' citizenship, those who had obtained Romanian citizenship and those who had not. The deportations, as well as the requisition and arson of villages during the retreat of the Romanian army show that the Bucharest authorities saw Southern Dobruja as a hostile territory. This is easily explained by the lack of trust in the loyalty of the new subjects. Statistics are clear in this respect: ethnic Bulgarians (over 60%) and ethnic Turks (almost 15%) are the most numerous interned civilians who were Romanian subjects. On the other hand, the number of interned civilians – Romanian subjects – was double compared to that of civilians from enemy countries.¹⁶

Romania's war plan (the so-called Hypothesis Z) included an offensive across the Carpathians and a defensive in Dobruja. Subsequently, an offensive was to be launched in Dobruja as well. Three quarters of the Romanian troops were engaged in the Transylvania offensive. It was expected that in 40 days' time the Romanian army would reach the Hungarian Plain. Once a new offensive was launched, the Romanian troops based in the south had to reach the Ruse-Varna line in only a few days.¹⁷ It seems to have been an easy campaign won from the very start. Yet this successful plan depended on two questionable factors: 1) Was

¹⁴ SANIC, Mihail Berceanu Personal Fonds, file I Ca 39, 1–19.

¹⁵ George Georgescu, *Fapte, împrejurări și amintiri în timpul neutralității și războiului. 1914–1919* [Facts, Circumstances and Memories during the Neutrality Period and the War. 1914–1919] (Bucharest: Cartea Românească, 1933), 22–23.

¹⁶ Bogdan Negoii, *Mărturii documentare: Lagărele de prizonieri din România în timpul primului război mondial* [Documentary Testimonies: The Romanian Prison Camps during the First World War] (Geamăna-Argeș: Tiparg, 2009), 214.

¹⁷ Comisia română de istorie militară [The Romanian Commission of Military History], *Proiecte și planuri de operațiuni ale Marelui Stat Major Român (până în anul 1916)* [Projects and Operation Plans of the Romanian General Staff], (Bucharest, 1992), 178–191.

the military operation coordination between the allies possible? 2) How would the enemy general headquarters react?

Due to the extension of the Russian front, Dobruja was the territory of the first direct military collaboration between Russia and its allies. The Romanian prime minister considered that the presence of Russian troops in Dobruja was compulsory so as to secure the southern border of the country. Some politicians from Bucharest and Petrograd believed that the Bulgarians would not dare shoot those who liberated them in 1877 from Ottoman rule.¹⁸ This reasoning was not shared by the commander of the Russian troops that were to be sent in Dobruja. General Andrei Zayonchkovski was suspicious of the troops of Serbian-Croatian volunteers he led, i.e. the famous Serbian First Division led by Colonel Stevan Hadžić.¹⁹ Above all, he did not trust the former Austro-Hungarians soldiers' capacity to fight. Besides, he feared that the Bulgarian-Serbian antipathy would be stronger than the Bulgarian-Russian sympathy.²⁰ There were also the Russians' doubts about the operational capacity of the troops dislocated at the border with Bulgaria, as Romanians lacked any real war experience.

While Brătianu was holding final negotiations over the country's entrance into the war, the German, Austro-Hungarian and Bulgarian general headquarters began to elaborate an action plan for this scenario in July 1916. A month before Romania's entrance into the war, the Central Powers had already approved a concrete action plan for the new frontline. Briefly, first they aimed at attracting as many troops as possible in Transylvania, followed by a massive offensive of the Bulgarian troops in Dobruja and, eventually, the crossing of the Danube and the advancement to Bucharest.²¹ The concrete details of this plan sparked off disputes between the allies. The Bulgarian Chief of Staff, General Zhostov, objected to the Bulgarian troops' crossing of the Danube and their fast advancement to Bucharest. There were few troops available for such an undertaking and the danger of a Romanian offensive in Dobruja was too high. Zhostov was reticent to allow the presence of Turkish divisions in Dobruja, and to accept that Field-marshal August von Mackensen could take over the lead of the Bulgarian troops that would fight against Romania.²² His unexpected death on the very

¹⁸ Duca, *Amintiri*, 266.

¹⁹ Information (including information contained in the Romanian archives) on the presence of this division on the Dobrujan front can be found in Miodrag Milin, "Voluntari sârbi pe frontul românesc din toamna anului 1916" [Serbian Volunteers on the Romanian Front in the Autumn of 1916], *Analele Banatului XXI* (2013), 439–453.

²⁰ Barrett, *Prelude*, 70.

²¹ See Ministerstvo na vojnata, *Bŭlgarskata armia v Svetovnata voina, 1915–1918*, vol. VIII: *Vojnata sreshtu Rumŭnia prez 1916 godina* (Sofia: Dŭrzhavna pechatnitsa, 1939), 60–75.

²² Gen. Sava Savov, gen. Konstantin Zhostov, *Intimnite prichini za pogromite na Bŭlgariia* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo Zemla, 2000), 143–155.

eve of the outbreak of the war with Romania smoothed these disputes. Meanwhile, the Bulgarian troops had taken over control on the Salonika Front, thus hampering the likelihood of any offensive launched by the Allied Army of the Orient. Consequently, a key condition for Romania's entrance into the war was missing just days before the Romanian army was mobilized. From that moment on, the German and Bulgarian authorities could plan the counteroffensive at the southern border of Romania in case the latter declared war against the Central Powers. The first movements of the Bulgarian troops from the Salonika Front to the border with Romania began prior to the mobilization of the Romanian army.²³

On the evening of 14/27 August 1916, Romania declared war only against Austro-Hungary. Brătianu was reluctant to declare war against Bulgaria straight away. The head of the Bucharest Cabinet believed that during the first days of the Romanian campaign the military effort was required only in Transylvania. Of course, if the Bulgarian troops had attacked the Romanian or the Russian troops in Dobruja, the prime minister would have been forced to declare war against Bulgaria too.²⁴ The Bulgarian government needed four days to react. In fact, Bulgaria was the last ally of Austro-Hungary that declared war against Romania. This generated an exaggerated felling of enthusiasm in Bucharest. It was believed that the presence of Russian soldiers in Dobruja was the reason for the Bulgarian troops' inactivity.²⁵ The Bulgarian government's lack of immediate reaction irked the German general headquarters that considered their ally to be reluctant. In order to make a political decision, the Bulgarian sovereign summoned the Crown Council.²⁶ Prime Minister Vasil Radoslavov was anxious not only about the difficulty in waging a two-front war but also about the ever-growing number of Russian troops on the Dobruja front. For a society divided into Russophiles and Russophobes such a presence could exert a strong influence on the political life of the Bulgarian state.²⁷ Finally, the last disputes over an offensive in Dobruja were resolved. Surprise was the key element of this offensive. A moral victory was expected before mobilizing more troops in Dobruja. The Bulgarian general headquarters objective was to immediately

²³ Glenn E. Torrey, *The Romanian Battlefield in World War I* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2012), 30–44.

²⁴ General Vasile Rudeanu, *Memorii din timpuri de pace și de război, 1884–1929* [Memoirs of Peace and War, 1884–1929] (Bucharest: Cavallioti, 2004), 180.

²⁵ Constantin Argetoianu, *Memorii* [Memoirs], vols. III–IV (Bucharest: Editura Machiavelli, 2008), 34.

²⁶ Georgi Markov, *Goliata voïna i bŭlgarskiïa meĥ nad balkanskiïa vŭzel, 1914–1919*, vol. I: *Zaplitaneto* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo Zahariï Stoianov, 2016), 412–413.

²⁷ D-r Vasil Radoslavov, *Dnevni belezhki 1914–1918* (Sofia: Izdatelstvo UI "Sv. Kliment Ohridski", 1993), 195–196.

take control of the major Romanian fortifications in Southern Dobruja and to establish the front along the Cernavodă–Constanța line. Much easier to defend, this line covered the shortest distance between the Danube and the Black Sea (approximately 50 km).²⁸

Almost two months of bloody war were needed for the troops of the Central Powers to achieve their goals on the Dobruja front. The occupation of the strategic railway between Constanța and Cernavodă deprived the Romanian army of the possibility to launch massive operations in Dobruja because of its lack of infrastructure. Controlling the shortest distance between the Black Sea and the Danube, the troops of the Central Powers enjoyed great strategic advantages: they could defend this part of the front more easily and could also dislocate a part of the troops. In late November 1916, a part of these troops crossed the Danube and joined the units that entered Wallachia after having crossed the Carpathians. By the end of the year, the Bulgarian troops managed to conquer the rest of Northern Dobruja, which was only defended by Russian troops.²⁹ A new chapter in the tumultuous history of this land began. This time the emerging disputes were related to the economic exploitation of the Romanian territory occupied by the Central Powers. Sharing the spoils of war was an important stake, as was the region's economic exploitation, a real breath of fresh air for the ailing economies of the countries that had been at war for years. The grievances were caused by the disproportion between the contribution to conquering this region and the quota share of the spoils of war. The oil and grain reserves in Constanța, as well as the railway which connected this port to Cernavodă were of paramount importance to the Germans, who dismissed the idea of a Bulgarian civil and military administration in Northern Dobruja. It was declared an occupation military zone that was briefly under German administration. Instead, the German general headquarters decided to leave Southern Dobruja under Bulgarian administration. Austro-Hungary and Turkey were also interested in exploiting Dobruja's economic potential.³⁰

Much to the Bulgarian authorities' dissatisfaction, this status quo was maintained until the spring of 1918. After the collapse of the Russian front, accepting the tough conditions imposed by its victors was Romania's only chance.

²⁸ *Bŭlgarskata armia v Svetovната voĭna, 270–331.*

²⁹ Torrey, *Romanian Battlefield*, 110–117.

³⁰ Information about the Central Powers' Administration in Dobrogea can be found in a memorandum signed by the German General Kurt von Unger, published in Constanța in 1917. In 2012, this brochure was reedited in a bilingual edition: Valentin Ciorbea, Constantin Cheramidoglu and Walter Rastätter, eds., *Denkschrift der Deutschen Etappen Verwaltung in der Dobrudscha Abgeschlossen Mitte April 1917/Memoriu al administrației germane de etapă în Dobrogea. Întocmit la mijlocul lui aprilie 1917* [Memorandum of the German Stage Administration of Dobruja Issued in Mid-April 1917] (Constanța: Ex Ponto, 2012), 1–123.

The Peace Treaty of Bucharest signed on 24 April/7 May 1918 stipulated that Romania “cedes to Bulgaria the Bulgarian territory which had fallen to it as a result of the peace treaty of Bucharest of 1913” with a small rectification of the frontier in favour of the latter. Also, Northern Dobruja, which Romania ceded to the Central Powers, was to be administered as a condominium. In exchange, the Central Powers pledged that Romania would get “a guaranteed commercial road to the Black Sea” by way of Cernavodă and Constanța.³¹ Visibly dissatisfied with the new status of Northern Dobruja, the Sofia government hoped that this formula would help the Bulgarians play first fiddle and would thus be subsequently able to take control of the whole province. It was only in September that a new agreement was reached on Northern Dobruja, which passed under complete Bulgarian control in exchange for certain commitments undertaken by the Sofia Cabinet towards its allies. This is, however, a legally unimportant act, given that Bulgaria was forced to surrender a week later.³² This was the beginning of the end for the Central Powers. Only a day before the capitulation of Germany, the Romanian government entered the war again. This symbolic gesture, which pointed to the forthcoming peace treaty, placed Romania in the victorious camp. The Central Powers’ administration in Dobruja was replaced by that of the Entente, which mediated the return of the Romanian authorities. The Bulgarian troops were urged to pull out of Dobruja up to the border drawn in the summer of 1913. This situation gave rise to new feelings of resentment. The return of the Romanian authorities faced the opposition of the Bulgarian population. French, English and Italian troops were deployed in Dobruja so as to secure peace in the region until a new peace treaty was signed. Unfortunately, the Treaty of Neuilly (27 November 1919) failed to put an end to the violence that occurred at the Romanian-Bulgarian border. The wounds of war were too fresh to be healed by a diplomatic treaty alone. Throughout the interwar period, Dobruja was a troublesome issue both for the Romanian and for the Bulgarian authorities. When the Second World War broke out, an exchange of population and a recreation of the old border established in 1878 were the last resort. During the time that elapsed from the signing of the Treaty of Craiova (7 September 1940), the two parts of Dobruja irreversibly lost their ethnic and confessional diversity, which caused many problems to the inflexible politicians in Sofia and Bucharest.

³¹ For the English translation of the Peace Treaty between Romania and the Central Powers, see United States, Department of State, *Texts of the Roumanian “Peace”* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1918), 5–28.

³² Antonina Kuzmanova et al., eds., *Istoriia na Dobrudza*, vol. IV (Veliko Tŭrnovo: Izdatelstvo “Faber”, 2007), 222–236.

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