

# ROMANIA 1944

The Turning of Arms against Nazi Germany



GRANT T. HARWARD

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHNNY SHUMATE

CAMPAIGN 404

---

# ROMANIA 1944

The Turning of Arms against Nazi Germany



GRANT T. HARWARD

ILLUSTRATED BY JOHNNY SHUMATE



# **CONTENTS**

## **ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN**

First Iași-Chișinău offensive

## **CHRONOLOGY**

## **OPPOSING COMMANDERS**

Romanian ▪ German ▪ Soviet ▪ American

## **OPPOSING FORCES**

Axis ▪ Soviet ▪ Orders of battle, 19 August 1944

## **OPPOSING PLANS**

Axis ▪ Soviet

## **THE CAMPAIGN**

Soviet attack ▪ Axis counter-attack ▪ Axis collapse ▪ Romanian royal coup ▪ German attempted counter-coup ▪ Contesting Transylvania

## **SUMMARY**

## **THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY**

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

## **ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR**

### Key to military symbols



Army Group



Army



Corps



Division



Brigade



Regiment



Battalion



Company/Battery



Platoon



Section



Squad



Infantry



Artillery



Cavalry



Airborne



Unit HQ



Air defence



Air Force



Air mobile



Air transportable



Amphibious



Anti-tank



Armour



Air aviation



Bridging



Engineer



Headquarters



Maintenance



Medical



Missile



Mountain



Navy



Nuclear, biological, chemical



Ordnance



Parachute



Reconnaissance



Signal



Supply



Transport movement



Rocket artillery



Air defence artillery

### Key to unit identification



(+) with added elements  
(-) less elements



# ORIGINS OF THE CAMPAIGN

Romania played an important yet often overlooked role on the Eastern Front in World War II. The invasion of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR or Soviet Union) by National Socialist (Nazi) Germany was a gargantuan undertaking that included contributions from a host of Axis states including Fascist Italy, Finland, Hungary, Slovakia and Croatia, but the most important contribution was by Romania. Romania played a vital role in the economy of Nazi Germany's empire. The Romanian Army and the German Army forged a close alliance on the battlefields of eastern Romania, southern Ukraine, Crimea, southern Russia and the northern Caucasus. Romanian soldiers carried out atrocities against Jews in Romanian-occupied territories and collaborated with German *Schutzstaffel* (SS) troops, Nazi paramilitaries, in the extermination of Jews in German-occupied territories. The German–Romanian alliance became increasingly important as the fighting dragged on in the USSR, which made Romania's eventual 'turning of arms' against Nazi Germany one of the key moments of World War II in Europe.

Nazi Germany needed Romania as an ally for two main reasons. The first was economic. Romania had a mostly unindustrialized economy focused on agricultural production and extraction of natural resources. Nazi Germany needed foodstuffs to feed its population and raw materials for its factories. Of course, the most important natural resource was oil. Romania boasted the largest oilfields in Europe, which were concentrated in the Prahova Valley. The oil refineries in Ploiești provided the lion's share of petroleum, oil and lubrication products for the Nazi war machine. After the Führer ('leader') Adolf Hitler took power in 1933, Romania had begun to drift into Nazi Germany's economic orbit, and on 23 March 1939, signed the German–Romanian Treaty for the Development of Economic Relations between the Two Countries. This traded Romanian agriculture, timber and oil for German military equipment and technical expertise and gave Nazi Germany free trade zones in Romania. The second reason was military. Romania bordered the USSR and was on the Black Sea coast. Therefore, Romania became an

important base for the Wehrmacht (German Armed Forces) once Nazi Germany decided to invade the Soviet Union. Moreover, Romania had a relatively large and well-equipped military that proved highly motivated on the Eastern Front.

An alliance between Nazi Germany and Romania was not obvious at the start of World War II. Romania had joined the Allies during World War I and had been aligned with France during the inter-war period. On 13 April 1939, as war threatened Europe, Britain and France provided guarantees of independence to Romania and Greece, similar to one already given to Poland, in an attempt to intimidate Hitler to turn back from war. After Nazi Germany invaded Poland on 1 September 1939, Romania adopted a policy of armed neutrality declaring general mobilization to deter a feared German attack through Hungary from the west and a possible Soviet invasion from the east. The USSR revived claims to Bessarabia, a former province of Imperial Russia that Romania had annexed following World War I, while occupying eastern Poland. The Soviet threat loomed even larger over Romania after the USSR launched the Winter War against Finland between November 1939 and March 1940, which resulted in the Soviet occupation of eastern Finland.



A Romanian military parade in Bucharest in May 1940. King Carol II reviews the modern mechanized troops of his country passing the equestrian statue of King Carol I across from the royal palace. This show of force was a normal part of the national day celebrations and acted to warn Romania's hostile neighbours. (Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images)

The fall of France in May 1940 was an earthquake that upturned Romania's neutrality. On 26 June 1940, the day after an armistice between Nazi Germany and France came into effect, the USSR delivered an ultimatum to Romania demanding not just Bessarabia but also northern Bukovina, a former province of the defunct Austro-Hungarian Empire. German diplomats rebuffed Romanian pleas for assistance, so King Carol II ordered the Romanian Army to withdraw from northern Bukovina and Bessarabia without a fight to avoid a full-scale Soviet invasion of Romania. Starting on 28 June 1940, the Romanian Army withdrew suffering humiliations during the four-day operation. On 1 July 1940, Romania waived the British and French guarantees as Carol II attempted to woo Hitler and join the Axis. Yet German diplomats demanded that Romania make further territorial concessions to Hungary and Bulgaria, both of which wanted to regain territory lost after World War I. While the concession of southern Dobruja to Bulgaria was generally accepted by the Romanian public, the loss of northern Transylvania to Hungary in the Second Vienna Award of 30 August 1940 triggered protests against the monarch. General Ion Antonescu, recently appointed as prime minister, forced Carol II into exile. Although the 19-year-old King Mihai I ascended to the throne, on 6 September 1940, the general seized dictatorial powers, declaring himself *conducător* ('leader'). Antonescu convinced Romanians to accept the loss of northern Transylvania, albeit temporarily, in order to gain Nazi Germany as an ally against the Soviet Union. On 23 November 1940, Romania signed the Tripartite Pact to join the Axis.





Romanian men in folk costume parade while offering the 'Roman salute' during a mass gathering of the Iron Guard in October 1940 during the short-lived National Legionary State. (European/FPG/Getty Images)

While Romania's volte-face from Anglo-French guarantees to German alliance may seem like naked opportunism or calculated Realpolitik, the alliance with Nazi Germany was built on a firm ideological foundation. Nationalism, religion, antisemitism and anti-communism pervaded Romania. Romanian nationalists had embarked on a century of nation-building and achieved the union of Wallachia and Moldavia and independence from the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century before annexing Bukovina, Bessarabia and Transylvania to create 'Greater Romania'. The Romanian Orthodox Church had an influential place in society. Romanian antisemites had transitioned from traditional religious arguments to employ modern economic and even biological arguments labelling Jews as a threat. After World War I, Romania had fought off Russian Bolshevik revolutionaries and had eliminated the Hungarian Soviet Republic, so anti-communism became a powerful new force in the country. Consequently, the myth of 'Judeo-Bolshevism' – the belief Judaism was associated with communism and Jews were responsible for the crimes of the Soviets – was widely believed in Romania. Romania provided fertile ground for fascism and the Legion of the Archangel Michael became one of the largest fascist movements in Europe in the 1930s. Therefore, Romania's reorientation toward Nazi Germany, initiated by King Carol II and completed by General Antonescu, received popular support because most Romanians hated and feared the Soviet Union.



The Führer Adolf Hitler (left) shaking hands with the conducător General Ion Antonescu (right) in front of the Führerbau ('the Führer's building') in Munich in June 1941. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Romania participated enthusiastically in Operation *Barbarossa*, the invasion of the USSR, and the Romanian Army quickly proved its worth on the Eastern Front. On 22 June 1941, Nazi Germany invaded the Soviet Union. Romania joined the German assault from the very first day, providing over 325,000 soldiers (with more to come) – unlike Fascist Italy that declared war the same day but did not have troops fighting on the Eastern Front for several months, or Finland and Hungary that both waited days until a Soviet provocation provided a suitable pretext to declare war. Romania fielded two armies that liberated northern Bukovina and Bessarabia and then drove deep into the USSR in support of German advances into southern Ukraine and Crimea. Romanian forces captured Odessa after a bloody two-month battle. In comparison, Fascist Italy sent one corps with 62,000 soldiers. Hungary also provided only one corps with 45,000 troops. Only Finland made a larger contribution of 500,000 soldiers, but Finnish forces barely advanced into the USSR after regaining territory taken by the Soviets and did not attempt a major assault on Leningrad. Before the invasion, German commanders had expected much of Finland and little of Romania, but during the 1941 campaigning the German Army discovered the Romanian Army was its most committed ally. Romania's commitment to Hitler's 'war of annihilation' against the USSR extended to the destruction of Jews. Romanian soldiers and

gendarmes, with support from German soldiers and SS troops in certain places, triggered the Iași pogrom, ‘cleansed the terrain’ of Jews in Bukovina and Bessarabia, and perpetrated the Odessa massacre. No other Axis troops played such a prominent role in what has become known as the ‘Holocaust by bullets’. Romania negotiated with Nazi Germany to occupy, administer and exploit a swath of Ukrainian territory between the Dniester and Bug rivers that was rechristened Transnistria. The Antonescu regime established concentration camps in Transnistria for Romanian Jews deported from Bukovina and Bessarabia and Soviet Jews from the region. Approximately 300,000 Jews died in Romania and Transnistria by the end of the war. Romanian troops assisted German SS-men in the murder of Soviet Jews in Ukraine as well as in Crimea. Romania’s ‘holy war’ – as Romanian propaganda called it – was against the Red Army on the front and the Jews in the rear. The alliance between Nazi Germany and Romania strengthened during Operation *Barbarossa*.



German mechanized vehicles and Romanian horse-drawn wagons advance along a destroyed railway track in southern Ukraine in October 1941. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Romania continued to make a significant contribution to Nazi Germany’s campaign against the Soviet Union. Romanian soldiers, alongside German troops, weathered the Soviet winter counteroffensive of 1941–42. Romanian forces played important supporting roles in the German spring recovery in Ukraine and Crimea. Additionally, after partially demobilizing during the



winter, Romania remobilized in the spring to support the German summer offensive of 1942. The Romanian Army provided more soldiers than any other Axis ally to Case Blue, the German attempt to conquer southern Russia and the Caucasus. By November 1942, the Romanian Army reached a peak of 464,000 troops on the front (including 83,300 occupying Transnistria). During the battle for Stalingrad, the Red Army destroyed the better part of two Romanian armies during the encirclement of German forces in the city. Nevertheless, during 1943, the Romanian Army still had 110,000 soldiers fighting in the Caucasus and securing Crimea or Ukraine. Romanian oil remained the primary source of fuel for German panzers. Romanian ports handled deliveries of Turkish chrome vital for German armament production. Romanian warships escorted Axis convoys on the Black Sea to supply Axis forces in the Kuban bridgehead, and later in Crimea. Yet as the tide of war turned against the Axis, the German–Romanian alliance began to fray.



Romanian mountain troops display a captured Soviet flag in September 1942. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

The alliance between Nazi Germany and Romania was never the same after Stalingrad. The Germans scapegoated the Romanians, as well as the Italians and Hungarians, for the disaster that befell them on the Volga River. The Romanians blamed the Germans for not heeding their warnings about their exposed positions before the Soviet winter counteroffensive and hanging them out to dry. German soldiers mocked and abused Romanian troops in the aftermath: forcing them off trains, kicking them out of shelters and threatening them with harm. German–Romanian relations recovered, but German arrogance and Romanian resentment increasingly undermined the alliance as it came under pressure due to Soviet victories on the Eastern Front. Nevertheless, the threat of the USSR returning to take vengeance on Romania for its atrocities against Jews, Soviet prisoners of war, Soviet civilians and Soviet partisans contributed to the Romanian Army remaining motivated to fight alongside the German Army to hold off the Red Army.



Soviet troops watch a column of Romanian prisoners of war trudge by after the success of encircling Stalingrad in November 1942. (The Dmitri Baltermants Collection/Corbis via Getty Images)



King Mihai I greets General Ion Antonescu during a celebration in 1940. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Yet as the fortunes of war turned against Nazi Germany, Romania began to explore how to leave the Axis. In January 1943, in the Casablanca Conference, the United States and Great Britain declared the Allies would accept only the ‘unconditional surrender’ of the Axis. After the Battle of Kursk in July 1943, the USSR seized the strategic initiative on the Eastern Front and started to liberate Ukraine. At the same time, the United States and Great Britain conquered Sicily. At the start of September 1943, as Fascist Italy secretly negotiated an armistice with the United States and Great Britain, Romania contacted American and British representatives in neutral countries to discuss terms. The Americans and British rebuffed the Romanians who were told that they had to deal with the Soviets. Marshal Antonescu (he had been promoted after the liberation of northern Bukovina and Bessarabia) refused to countenance such a diplomatic effort – at least not yet. King Mihai I became disillusioned with the conducător’s leadership and gathered a small group of officers around him to plan a coup against Antonescu. The king also reached out to the leaders of the outlawed political parties in Romania. Iuliu Maniu, the leader of the National Peasant Party, had made contact with the British Special Operations Executive three years previously and tried to use that relationship to negotiate with the Western Allies on behalf of the ‘United Opposition’. Again, the Americans and British



told the Romanians to talk to the Soviets. The Antonescu regime and the United Opposition both wanted to retain northern Bukovina and Bessarabia and hoped Allied forces would invade the Balkans to reach Romania ahead of Soviet forces and thus forestall an occupation by the Soviet Union. All signs of an Anglo-American amphibious landing in the Balkans were a feint to distract Nazi Germany from the cross-channel invasion of France, however. In the event, the Red Army used Romania as its gateway into the Balkans.

## FIRST IAȘI–CHIȘINĂU OFFENSIVE

Joseph Stalin, general secretary of the Communist Party and head of the USSR, favoured a broad front strategy in reconquering Soviet territory from the Germans – relentlessly attacking in as many places as possible for as long as possible to batter the enemy into submission. In January 1944, Stavka Verkhovnogo Glavnokomandovaniya (Stavka), or Soviet Headquarters of the Supreme Main Command, began a winter offensive with attacks in the region of Leningrad in the north and in central Ukraine in the south. The Red Army organized a series of offensive operations that collapsed German defences trying to hold the great bend of the Dnieper River running through the heart of Ukraine. Over the next several months, German forces were destroyed or retreated in disarray. Stalin directed Stavka to launch a new spring offensive despite the challenges of the approaching *rasputitsa* (‘season of bad roads’) to wrest control of the remainder of Ukraine, and later Crimea. On 4 March 1944, the Soviets launched an attack meant to split German forces in two, shoving part into southern Poland and part into eastern Romania. Both the Oberkommando des Heeres (OKH), or German Army High Command, and the Romanian General Staff were surprised by the size and scope of the Soviet spring offensive.

Soviet forces soon threatened Romania. On 15 March, tanks of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front seized Vapniarka, an important railroad junction in Transnistria just 50km from the Dniester; and incidentally until late 1943 also the site of a concentration camp for Jewish political prisoners (communists, socialists, Zionists and others) from Romania. As a result, the same day, German Army Group A took control of Transnistria – which had been renamed the Military Government between the Dniester and the Bug after the end of Romanian civilian administration a month earlier. Hitler was desperate to hold onto the port at Odessa to keep supplying by sea German and

Romanian forces in ‘encircled’ Crimea, which were tying down enemy forces and denying the peninsula to the Soviets for use as a base for air and naval attacks against Romania and Bulgaria. Also that day, the Romanian General Staff ordered the remobilization of Romanian Fourth Army to defend the homeland. Yet with most of its remaining troops in Crimea, the Romanian Army initially had only a corps and an ad hoc armoured group to commit to the fight. The Soviets moved too fast for the Romanians. On 18 March, Soviet troops from the east crossed the Dniester near Mogilev-Podolskii into northern Bessarabia, and eight days later crossed the Prut into northern Moldavia, before Romanian troops could organize a defence. At the same time, Soviet 1st Ukrainian Front broke through from the north. German Eighth Army withdrew in disorder. On 26 March, Soviet forces crossed the Dniester into Bukovina and Cernăuți, the regional capital, fell without a fight. A few days later Soviet forces from the north and east linked up near Hotin. Meanwhile, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front threatened to isolate and destroy German Sixth Army and Romanian Third Army in southern Transnistria on the Black Sea coast.



Romanian infantrymen, bundled up against late-winter weather, head toward the front in March 1944. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)



Romanian soldiers and civilians evacuate from the zone behind the front while German troops watch in June 1944. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-244-2311-19)

At this point, Stavka calculated that there was a chance to knock Romania out of the war. The loss of Romania would deprive the Wehrmacht of its important ally and cut it off from the oilfields in the Prahova Valley. Additionally, if Romania capitulated, the Red Army could rush into Bulgaria and Yugoslavia. Stalin was anxious for them to occupy the region with an eye to establishing post-war Soviet dominion over the Balkans. Stavka identified the cities of Iași, the regional capital of Moldavia, and Chișinău, the regional capital of Bessarabia, as the initial objectives of the new Soviet offensive. Stavka planners believed the capture of Iași and Chișinău would prevent Axis forces from organizing a defensive line to halt Soviet forces in north-east Romania to keep them from flooding through the so-called Focșani Gap into the flat terrain of Wallachia (where Bucharest and Ploești were located). Additionally, the Soviets believed the loss of these two important cities might compel the Antonescu regime to abandon the Axis. Soviet and Romanian diplomats began to meet in secret in neutral Sweden to discuss a possible armistice. While Soviet 1st Ukrainian Front went west into Poland, Stavka directed Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front to advance south toward Iași and Chișinău and Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front to continue to clear the Black Sea coast from the east aiming to reach the Danube River. The two Soviet fronts were supposed to link up in southern Moldavia before then advancing into

Wallachia. Stalin also found that he had an unexpected card to play to ratchet up pressure even more on Romania to make peace.



Allied airmen in Italy check damage caused to their B-17 after a mission over Romania.  
(Mondadori via Getty Images)

An American air assault against the rear augmented the Soviet ground assault on the front during the first Iași–Chișinău offensive. American bombers had attacked Romanian oil refineries previously, once ineffectually in 1942 and once more disastrously in 1943, but now in 1944 the US Army Air Force embarked on a sustained bombing campaign against a range of targets. The Soviet victories in Ukraine convinced Allied commanders to send valuable heavy bombers against Romania even before establishing a way to co-ordinate with the Soviets. Allied commanders had adopted the Transportation Plan by this point in the war, so the US Fifteenth Air Force based in southern Italy received orders to hit railroad targets in Romanian



cities as soon as the weather permitted. On 4 April the clouds cleared, and American bombers attacked railway yards in Bucharest for the first time. The inhabitants of the capital were as yet unaccustomed to air raids, and the train station was crowded with refugees who had fled from the advancing front in north-eastern Romania. In addition to damaging marshalling yards and other infrastructure, bombs killed 2,942 civilians and wounded 2,126 others. This was just the first of many more American air attacks against Romanian cities.

The Soviet attempt to overrun eastern Romania now really got under way. On 8 April, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front began to attack south into Moldavia between the Siret and Prut rivers aiming for Iași. That same day, other Soviet forces started an attack against Axis forces in Crimea. On 10 April, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front took Odessa, which finally convinced Hitler to begin evacuating Crimea two days later. Yet, at first, the evacuation was only of Axis support troops; OKH ordered combat troops to stay and try to hold a perimeter around Sevastopol. Axis forces arriving at Constanța, a port on the Romanian coast, were disorganized and demoralized following a perilous sea voyage harassed by enemy aircraft and submarines. Consequently, German and Romanian troops who escaped from Crimea did not contribute much to the defence of Moldavia and Bessarabia in the coming weeks and months. German Army Group A, now renamed German Army Group South Ukraine, regrouped the battered German Eighth, German Sixth and Romanian Third Armies, while it also received the fresh Romanian Fourth Army to make a stand in Romania.



Troops of the German Grossdeutschland Panzergrenadier Division hitch a ride on an assault gun travelling along a road in Moldavia on the Iași front in April/May 1944. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

The first Iași–Chișinău offensive quickly began to run into trouble. Stavka tended to push Soviet forces hard, ordering attack after attack until logistics became overstretched and soldiers became exhausted. After months of winter fighting, the two Soviet fronts attacking Romania were worn down and overextended. In contrast, while also degraded by combat, German Army Group South Ukraine fell back onto a solid logistical network. Romania lacked a partisan movement to harass Axis supply lines. US bombers had only just begun to hit transportation infrastructure in Romania so it was virtually intact. Romanian state railways, nicknamed ‘Second Army’ in propaganda, could still quickly shift soldiers and supplies. Additionally, as German armies withdrew into Romania, the length of front that German Army Group South Ukraine had to hold shrank, allowing reserves to be created and used to stop enemy breakthroughs. At the same time, Romania had started a general mobilization and provided a steadily growing number of soldiers in reinforcement. The hilly terrain of Moldavia and Bessarabia, in comparison to the flat steppe of Ukraine, also gave the defenders an advantage. The wet spring weather now turned roads into mud, hindering movement. For these reasons, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front made little progress from the north into northern Moldavia and northern Bessarabia and Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front stalled on the Dniester unable to cross into central

and southern Bessarabia. By 17 April, German Army Group South Ukraine had stabilized the front, which ran south along the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains then turned east across central Moldavia and central Bessarabia before it again turned south along the bank of the Dniester until reaching the Black Sea.



German Panzergrenadiers walk across a field in Moldavia on the Iași front in May 1944.  
(Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

Soviet forces continued to unsuccessfully try to break through to Iași and Chișinău. On 2 May, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front launched another breakthrough attempt from the north in Moldavia, for a second time trying to seize Târgu Frumos west of Iași, but German panzers and Romanian infantry defeated the Soviet forces in a week of fighting. This defeat threw a wrench in Stavka's plans, which resulted in Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front delaying plans to try to force the Dniester from the west. After 8 May, German Army Group South Ukraine took advantage of the Soviet pause to organize attacks and eliminated several Soviet bridgeheads over the river that threatened Chișinău. Meanwhile, Soviet forces eliminated the last Axis resistance in Crimea, and, on 13 May, tens of thousands of German and Romanian soldiers entered captivity. Stalin and Stavka realized Axis troops in Romania were not going to collapse and Soviet forces lacked the ability to capture Iași and Chișinău for the moment. On 15 May, Stavka ordered a reshuffling of the commanders of the two Soviet fronts. On 26 May, a new Stavka directive

signed by Stalin, plus the transfer of a tank army to Byelorussia, put offensive operations in Romania on hold indefinitely. Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front had to cancel another attack that was in preparation. German Army Group South Ukraine had noticed the build-up and launched two spoiling attacks near Iași between 30 May and 5 June. Thereafter, both sides settled into trench warfare, as the Soviets steadily built up forces for a fresh offensive and the Germans and the Romanians raced to construct fortified lines to meet the inevitable enemy attack.



A German anti-tank unit in Iași in May 1944 as Axis forces fought to hold the city against Soviet attacks. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)

The fighting on the ground abated but the fighting in the air intensified. Allied commanders had decided to shift from targeting transportation to targeting oil in mid-May. By that point, after much negotiation, the Americans and British had established an Allied air liaison with the Soviets in Moscow, which improved the co-ordination of the Allied air campaign and the Soviet ground campaign against Romania. The two sides agreed to a bomb line running from Budapest to Ploești to Bucharest to Constanța – everything to the west assigned to the US Army Air Force and Royal Air Force and everything to the east assigned to the Red Air Force. The Soviets supported the plan for the Americans to shift to oil targets, but requested the Americans be prepared to shift back to transportation targets once the Soviets



were again ready for a major offensive. Thereafter, US Fifteenth Air Force refocused on hammering the oil refineries in and around Ploești, plus other cities with oil storage sites or river ports where oil was loaded on barges to be transported up the Danube, to reduce oil production and cut off oil deliveries. On 11 June, the bomb line was dissolved because the Americans and British had finally convinced the Soviets to allow an Allied air liaison to work directly with the Red Army, which enabled greater efficiency and ability to hit targets farther east. American bombers steadily destroyed Romanian oil targets during the day. By night, British and Soviet bombers mined the Danube to obstruct river traffic delivering oil to the Reich and supplies to Romania. The Royal Air Force concentrated on the choke point at the Iron Gates near the Serbian border while the Red Air Force focused on the branches of the delta flowing into the Black Sea. German Luftflotte 4 and the Romanian Air Force tried to defend the skies of Romania but experienced increasingly heavy losses in pilots and aircraft. This eventually granted the Western Allies and Soviets air superiority over Romania, which provided Stavka with another advantage.

Stalin remained determined to advance on all fronts. On 22 June, the Red Army launched Operation *Bagration* to destroy German forces holding Byelorussia. Not content to decimate only German Army Group Centre, Stavka started to gather fresh forces and make new plans to also crush German Army Group South Ukraine before the end of the summer. The second Iași–Chișinău offensive also would eliminate Nazi Germany's most important ally on the Eastern Front: Romania. Meanwhile, Hitler and Antonescu debated intelligence about enemy intentions and strategy for the final defence of Romania. Time was quickly running out for the Axis forces, if anything was to be done to stave off the catastrophe on the horizon.

# CHRONOLOGY

## 1944

- 4 March** Stavka launches the Soviet spring offensive in Ukraine.
- 15 March** German Army Group A assumes control of Transnistria and Romanian Fourth Army begins remobilizing.
- 18 March** Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front crosses the Dniester into northern Bessarabia.
- 26 March** Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front crosses the Prut into northern Moldavia.
- 28 March** Soviet forces link up near Hotin.
- 4 April** US Fifteenth Air Force begins a sustained bombing campaign of Romania.
- 5 April** German Army Group A renamed German Army Group South Ukraine.
- 8 April** Soviet offensive to reconquer Crimea begins.
- 10 April** Odessa falls to Soviet forces.
- 17 April** Axis defences stabilize in Romania.
- 13 May** Crimea falls to Soviet forces.
- 30 May** German local counter-attacks at Iași begin.
- 2 June** German local counter-attacks at Iași end.
- 22 June** Stavka begins the Soviet summer offensive in Byelorussia.
- 19 August** Allied bombing of Romania ends and local Soviet attacks on Iași front begin.
- 20 August** Stavka orders start of the Soviet summer offensive in Romania.
- 23 August** King Mihai I carries out a coup against Marshal Ion Antonescu.
- 24 August** German Luftwaffe rear area troops attempt to seize Bucharest, and Romanian Third Army capitulates in southern Bessarabia.
- 25 August** Romania officially declares war on Nazi Germany.
- 26 August** German resistance in Bucharest ends.
- 29 August** Soviet forces encircle a German corps on the Prut River while German Eighth Army escapes from central Moldavia into northern Transylvania.

- 31 August** Soviet troops parade through Bucharest, and German troops surrounded in Ploești surrender.
- 5 September** Encircled German Sixth Army collapses in central Bessarabia, and Hungarian Second Army begins attacking from northern Transylvania.
- 7 September** Romanian forces halt German–Hungarian attacks in southern Transylvania while Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front subordinates the remnants of Romanian Third and Fourth Armies under its command.
- 12 September** The Soviet–Romanian Armistice comes into effect and German–Hungarian forces retreat back into northern Transylvania.

# OPPOSING COMMANDERS

## ROMANIAN

**King Mihai I of Romania (1921–2017).** The fourth king of Romania of the house of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen from Germany, Mihai I took the throne at the age of five in 1927 after the death of his grandfather King Ferdinand I. Mihai's father, Crown Prince Carol, had renounced his claim to the throne, divorced his wife and gone into exile in order to be with his mistress. In 1930, Carol engineered his return to Romania using the crisis of the Great Depression to be crowned King Carol II. Mihai became the Grand Voivode (a traditional Slavic term for leader) of Alba Iulia. After Marshal Antonescu forced Carol II to abdicate, his son again took the throne at the age of 19. While Antonescu declared himself leader (conducător) of the state, Mihai I technically remained the head of state. Importantly, he remained the official head of the Romanian Armed Forces.





King Mihai I of Romania. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)

In 1941, the young king initially supported the German-led crusade against communism, met Hitler, and even complained he was prevented from visiting the front as often as he wanted. In 1943, after Stalingrad, Mihai I lost faith in the alliance with Nazi Germany and started to challenge Antonescu more and more. He strengthened contacts with members of the outlawed historical parties and demanded to be kept better informed about the military situation on the Eastern Front. Mihai I started to gather around him a small group of conspirators, mostly military men assigned to the royal household or generals previously purged from the military by Antonescu for being too close to Carol II, to prepare to take action against the Antonescu regime if necessary. When Antonescu refused to agree to an armistice with the Soviets in spring 1944, Mihai I began to meet directly with the leaders of the United Opposition and plan seriously for a coup with his co-conspirators.

**Conducător Mareșal Ion Antonescu (1882–1946).** Born into a military family in Pitești in Wallachia, Antonescu was fated to become an army officer and attended the School for Military Sons in Craiova. Antonescu used family connections to the royal household to be introduced to the king and crown

prince. In 1904, he graduated from the Infantry and Cavalry Military School as a second lieutenant. Antonescu easily gained admittance to the Superior Cavalry School at Târgoviște and obtained a plum assignment to the 1st Roșiori Regiment – an elite cavalry unit. During the peasant uprising of 1907, he ordered his men to fire on a mob in Galați, for which he was personally congratulated by the monarch. Antonescu graduated from the Superior War School in 1913 and served as a divisional staff officer for the 1st Cavalry Division during the Second Balkan War soon after.



Marshal Ion Antonescu, conducător of Romania. (Corbis via Getty Images)

After Romania entered World War I, Antonescu became the chief of staff for General Constantin Prezan, a royal favourite, who commanded First Army. After the disastrous 1916 campaign, Prezan became chief of the General Staff, and Antonescu went with him as his operations officer. He rose to the rank of colonel and proved to be a competent staff officer during the fighting. In 1919, Antonescu accompanied the Romanian delegation as a

military adviser to the Paris Peace Conference. He obtained a prestigious position as the military attaché to Paris from 1922 to 1926 in large part due to royal patronage. When he returned to Romania, Antonescu commanded the Superior School of War. He became infamous for being irascible, demanding and arrogant. In 1931, he was promoted to general. His reputation for incorruptibility, and his royal connections, resulted in Antonescu being made chief of the General Staff in 1933. Yet he soon clashed with the minister of defence and resigned the next year.

Thereafter, Antonescu increasingly dabbled in politics despite still being in uniform. He became critical of King Carol II. Antonescu courted several far-right populist groups including the fascist Legion of the Archangel Michael. In 1937, he became the minister of defence for a few months under the short-lived antisemitic government of the National Christian Party but was replaced once the king instituted a royal dictatorship. As the commander of III Corps, Antonescu publicly criticized the harsh crackdown on Legionaries by the Carlist regime that resulted in him being forced into retirement, and later placed under house arrest. In 1940, the king appointed the general as prime minister in the hopes that his virtuous repute and links to the Legionaries would enable him to form a government that would save the Carlist regime. Instead, he forced the king into exile and seized power for himself.

When the invasion of the USSR began in 1941, Antonescu became the titular commander of a mixed Romanian–German army group. He remained at the front for a month until Army Group Antonescu was dissolved following the liberation of Romanian territory occupied by the Soviet Union. The king then elevated Antonescu to the rank of marshal. Thereafter, except for periodic visits to inspect the front, he remained in Bucharest. In 1944, when the front returned to Romania, Antonescu did not take command of a Romanian–German army group, but he meddled in strategic and operational decisions, often going over the heads of his own commanders.

**General de corp de armată Ilie Șteflea (1887–1946).** Șteflea was born in the village of Săliște in Transylvania, which was then part of Austria-Hungary. His family moved to northern Dobruja, which had recently been annexed by Romania, to improve their economic situation. Șteflea decided to apply to the Infantry Officer Military School. In 1909, he became a second lieutenant and joined the 34th Infantry Regiment. During the 1916 campaign, Șteflea led a machine-gun company and was wounded in action. For most of

the rest of World War I he instructed at infantry schools rising to the rank of major.



General Ilie Șteflea, chief of the Romanian General Staff. (Wikimedia Commons/Public domain)

In 1920, Șteflea graduated at the top of his class from the Superior War School, and then worked on the General Staff for a time. During the rest of the inter-war period, he was involved in infantry training or general staff training, except for three years after 1933, by which time he was a colonel, when he was the chief of staff of the Inspectorate of the Army. In 1939, now a general, Șteflea became one of the vice chiefs of the General Staff. The following year, he was assigned as secretary general of the Ministry of Defence.

When Romania joined the Nazi invasion of the USSR, Șteflea was the commander of the 3rd Infantry Division. He commanded that unit at the battle for Odessa. When the chief of the General Staff resigned in early 1942 because he opposed Antonescu's decision to make a maximum Romanian contribution to the coming German summer offensive, Șteflea was given the job. He proved an inspired choice because he was both militarily able and



politically reliable. Șteflea did have complaints, however; he submitted his resignation twice. First, in August 1942, after Antonescu had insulted the work of the General Staff. Second, in April 1944, again after Antonescu spoke ill of the General Staff, but also because he made operational agreements with German commanders without first consulting the General Staff. In both cases, however, Șteflea's ruffled feathers were easily smoothed and he continued to work for the conducător. He endeavoured to find men and materiel to fend off the Soviet menace.

**General de armată Petre Dumitrescu (1882–1950).** Born in Dobridor village in Wallachia, Dumitrescu graduated from the Artillery and Engineer Military School in 1903 to become a second lieutenant. In 1913, he completed his courses at the Superior War School. During World War I, Dumitrescu served as a staff officer, and by 1918 was a major in the Operations Bureau of the Second Army. In 1920, he was promoted to colonel. Over the next decade, Dumitrescu served as the chief of operations for the General Staff twice, chief of the Secretariat of the Supreme National Defence Council, and commander of the 2nd Artillery Regiment and then the 4th Artillery Brigade. In 1930 he became a general. Over the next ten years, Dumitrescu served as the Romanian military attaché in France and Belgium, commander of the 13th Infantry Division, one of the vice chiefs of the General Staff, the commander of I Corps, and the Inspector General of the Artillery. In 1940, he briefly took command of the First Army.



General Petre Dumitrescu, commander of Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu and Romanian Third Army. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

By the time the Nazi–Soviet war broke out, Dumitrescu had been made the commander of the Third Army, and he stayed in the position for over three years. In 1941, he led his troops through northern Bukovina and into southern Ukraine before being tasked with administrative duties for all Romanian troops east of the Dniester. In 1942, Dumitrescu commanded front-line troops advancing into the Caucasus before being sent to lead troops deployed on the Don River. After shepherding the survivors of Stalingrad back to Romania at the start of 1943, he again became responsible for administration, supply and discipline of Romanian troops in the rear. At the beginning of 1944, Dumitrescu again received operational control of front-line units.

**General de corp de armată Gheorghe Avramescu (1884–1945).** The son of well-off peasants in Botoșani in Moldavia, Avramescu graduated from the prestigious A. T. Laurian High School. In 1908, he graduated from the Infantry and Cavalry Military School as a second lieutenant. In 1911, Avramescu finished courses at the Special Infantry School. He was the mobilization officer and then the regimental adjutant of the 38th ‘Neagoe

Basarab' Infantry Regiment that marched into Bulgaria during the Second Balkan War of 1913.



General Gheorghe Avramescu (centre), acting commander of the Romanian Fourth Army (photo taken in 1942). (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

At the start of Romania's intervention in World War I in 1916, Avramescu was a company commander in the 78th Infantry Division, which was soon defeated in Dobruja. He was wounded but quickly returned to the front. Avramescu, now a battalion commander, distinguished himself during the fighting retreat from Wallachia into Moldavia. In 1917, he was promoted to major and bravely led his troops in defeating the enemy summer offensive. In

1918, he became chief of staff of the 1st Vânători (Light Infantry) Division, and then chief of the intelligence office for III Corps. In 1919, Avramescu graduated from the Superior War School. During the 1920s, he commanded several infantry regiments. During the 1930s, Avramescu served as the chief of the transport section of the General Staff and the technical inspector of the Gendarmerie Training Centre. He then took command of a brigade, and in 1937, he was promoted to general.

In 1939, Avramescu was appointed commander of the 10th Infantry Division. Just before the start of the invasion of the USSR in 1941, he was promoted and assigned as commander of Mountain Corps. Avramescu led his elite troops as they liberated northern Bukovina, pushed into Ukraine and helped conquer Crimea. Thereafter, he remained in Crimea guarding the coast and fighting partisans. In autumn 1943, Avramescu left to command III Corps in Transnistria. In spring 1944, he was transferred to VI Corps in Moldavia during the first Iași–Chișinău offensive. When General Ioan Mihail Racoviță went on leave that summer, Avramescu became acting commander of Fourth Army on the Iași front.

## **GERMAN**

**Generaloberst Johannes Friessner (1892–1971).** Born in Chemnitz in Saxony, Friessner became a cadet in the 103rd ‘Grand Duke Friedrich II of Baden’ Infantry Regiment of the Royal Saxon Army in 1911. A year later, he obtained a commission as a second lieutenant. At the start of World War I in 1914, Friessner was a battalion adjutant in the 179th Infantry Regiment. He spent the war on the Western Front. In 1916, Friessner became a staff officer of the 24th Infantry Division.



General Johannes Friessner, commander of German Army Group South Ukraine. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Friessner remained in the military during the inter-war period. In 1922, he was promoted to captain, and then served as a company commander. After 1928, Friessner became an instructor of tactics and adjutant to the commander at the War School in Dresden. In 1935, he joined the teaching staff of the War School in Potsdam, and three years later he became the chief of staff of the Inspectorate of War Schools in Berlin.

At the start of World War II in 1939, Friessner was the Inspector of Education and Training for the army. In 1942, now a general, he became the commander of the Silesian 102nd Infantry Division on the Eastern Front. In 1943, Friessner was promoted to command XXIII Corps with Army Group Centre. In spring 1944, Hitler assigned him to command Army Group North hoping that he would hold the line in the Baltic region. Friessner, however, soon argued his army group would need to retreat. Consequently, later that summer, Hitler swapped the commanders of Army Group North and Army Group South Ukraine.



**General der Infanterie Otto Wöhler (1894–1987).** Wöhler was the son of a prominent farmer who was the community leader in the town of Burgwedel in Lower Saxony. In 1913, he became a second lieutenant joining the 167th Infantry Regiment. During World War I, Wöhler fought with the regiment on the Western Front. At the end of the conflict, he decided to remain in the army.



General Otto Wöhler (left), commander of German Army Group Wöhler and German Eighth Army. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-2007-0313-500)

In 1919, Wöhler became a regimental adjutant in the 22nd Rifle Regiment in Kassel. In 1926 he completed the general staff course. By 1938, Wöhler was a colonel on the staff of the Wehrmacht Academy in Berlin and, soon after, he became the chief of operations for 5th Frontier Command.

When World War II started in 1939, Wöhler was the chief of operations for the Fourteenth Army during the invasion of Poland. In 1940, he joined the campaign against France as the chief of staff of XVII Corps. By 1941, Wöhler was the chief of staff of the Eleventh Army, which invaded the USSR from Romania. At the start of 1942, he was promoted to general and transferred to be the chief of staff of Army Group Centre. In spring 1943, Wöhler became the commander of I Corps in the Baltic region. Later that summer, he was reassigned to command Eighth Army in western Ukraine.

**General der Artillerie Maximilian Fretter-Pico (1892–1984).** Fretter-Pico was born in Karlsruhe in Baden-Württemberg. In 1911, he attended the Military School in Danzig as a cadet. The next year, Fretter-Pico received his commission as second lieutenant in the 14th 'Grand Duke' Field Artillery Regiment. In 1913, he completed a course at the Field Artillery Firing School in Jüterbog.



General Maximilian Fretter-Pico, commander of German Sixth Army. (Wikimedia Commons/[CC BY-SA 4.0](#))

In 1914, when World War I began, Fretter-Pico was a battalion adjutant in his regiment and was wounded. When he returned to the Western Front in 1915, he commanded an anti-balloon gun platoon. After 1916, Fretter-Pico served as a brigade adjutant and a divisional ordnance officer. In 1918, he was detached to attend general staff training before being assigned to the 19th Reserve Division.

Fretter-Pico remained in the army, briefly returning to his old regiment. In 1922, he was detached to and later joined the staff of 1st Group Command. Then, after 1924, Fretter-Pico served off and on there between assignments on the staff of the Army Operations Department, T1, Troop Office in the Ministry of the Reichswehr. In 1930, after finishing a course at the Army Riding School, he joined the staff of the 1st Cavalry Division. In 1935, Fretter-Pico transferred to lead Foreign Armies East in the 3rd Department of the Foreign Office of the General Staff. Three years later, he briefly served as a military attaché to the Turkish Army, before returning to take over as chief of staff of the General Command of Saar-Palatinate Border Troops.

In 1939, when World War II broke out, Fretter-Pico's general command was transformed into XXIV Corps, which later took part in the campaign against France. In early 1941, after being promoted to general, he became the commander of the 97th Jäger Division and led it during the invasion of the Soviet Union. At the end of the year, Fretter-Pico received command of XXX Corps in Crimea. In summer 1944, he was reassigned to lead the reconstituted Sixth Army in Romania.

## **SOVIET**

**Márshal sovetского soyuza Semyon Timoshenko (1895–1970).** The youngest child of a large peasant family, Timoshenko was born in 1895 in the village of Furmanovka in Bessarabia. He spoke both Russian and Ukrainian, and some Romanian – the language of most of the people in his village. At the end of 1914, Timoshenko was drafted into the Russian Army. He trained as a machine-gunner and became a non-commissioned officer in the 4th Cavalry Division fighting on the southern and central parts of the Eastern Front.



Marshal Semyon Timoshenko, Stavka co-ordinator (photo from 1941). (Corbis via Getty Images)

In 1918, Timoshenko joined the Red Army, becoming an officer, to fight in the Russian Civil War. He led the 1st Revolutionary Crimean Cavalry Regiment in breaking through besieging White forces to help with the defence of Tsaritsyn (later Stalingrad), where he became acquainted with Stalin. Timoshenko rose quickly to command a cavalry brigade and then a cavalry division. From 1920 to 1921, during the Polish–Soviet War, he commanded the 4th Leningrad Cavalry Division. For the rest of the decade, Timoshenko headed III Cavalry Corps, when not taking courses at the N. G. Tolmachev Military-Political Academy. During the 1930s, he oversaw military districts in Byelorussia, the Kiev area, the northern Caucasus and the Kharkov area.

After Nazi Germany invaded Poland from the west in 1939, Timoshenko commanded the Ukrainian Front that occupied Galicia from the east. The next year, following the disastrous first Soviet attack into Finland during the Winter War, he was ordered to take over the Northwestern Front. Timoshenko reorganized Soviet forces, brought in more men and materiel, and developed

a new plan that broke the Finnish defences. Soon after, he was promoted to marshal and made the People's Commissar for Defence. In 1941, Timoshenko took over the Western Front fighting desperately against the Nazi invaders. The following spring, Timoshenko oversaw the Soviet catastrophe during the second battle for Kharkov, after which he was transferred to head the Northwestern Front. Beginning in spring 1943, he became a Stavka representative tasked with developing plans and co-ordinating various fronts in operations around Leningrad, in the northern Caucasus and Crimea, in the Baltic region, and finally against Romania.

**Generál armii Rodion Malinovsky (1898–1967).** Born out of wedlock in Odessa, Malinovsky never knew his father, and worked on a farm and in a general store as a youth. In 1914, not yet 16 years old, he volunteered to join the 256th Elisavetgrad Infantry Regiment as a machine-gun assistant. The next year, Malinovsky was badly wounded. In 1916, now a non-commissioned officer, he joined the Russian Expeditionary Force sent to fight on the Western Front in France. A year later, he was wounded in battle, so he was in hospital when Russian soldiers, influenced by the events at home, revolted in France. Yet when Malinovsky had recovered, he joined the Russian Legion of Honour and continued to fight until the armistice in 1918.





General Rodion Malinovsky, commander of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front. (PhotoQuest/Getty Images)

In 1919, Malinovsky returned to Russia, arriving in the Far East where White forces were collapsing already. He and other soldiers sought out the Red Army and became machine-gunners in the 240th Infantry Regiment. After the Russian Civil War, Malinovsky remained with the Red Army. In 1930, he graduated from the M. V. Frunze Military Academy and became chief of staff of the 67th Caucasian Cavalry Regiment. Malinovsky then served with the headquarters of the Byelorussian Military District. In 1935, he became chief of staff of III Cavalry Corps. In 1937, under the *nom de guerre* 'Malino', Malinovsky travelled to Spain to act as a military adviser for a year and a half. Upon his return, he was promoted to command a brigade.

In 1939, Malinovsky became a lecturer at the M. V. Frunze Military Academy. When Nazi Germany invaded the USSR in 1941, he recently had taken command of XXXXVIII Rifle Corps stationed in northern Bessarabia. Malinovsky ably delayed the enemy and prevented his corps from being encircled multiple times during the retreat, so he was promoted to command

the Sixth Army and then Southern Front by the end of the year. In 1942, Malinovsky took part in the defeat in the Second Battle of Kharkov, therefore he was temporarily demoted to command the Sixty-Sixth Army. He redeemed himself commanding the Second Guards Army during the Soviet counteroffensive at Stalingrad. In 1943, Malinovsky again took command of Southern Front, soon renamed 3rd Ukrainian Front, and helped liberate Ukraine. In spring 1944, he was reassigned to command 2nd Ukrainian Front in Romania.

**Generál armii Fyodor Tolbukhin (1894–1949).** Tolbukhin was born into a peasant family in the village of Androniki near Moscow. He attended a parochial school and then a *zemstvo* (elected local council) school. After his father died in 1907, his family moved in with his brother in St Petersburg, enabling him to graduate from a trade school. In 1911, Tolbukhin began working as an accountant. At the end of 1914, he volunteered for the army, and he trained in an automobile company. In 1915, after completing an officer training course, Tolbukhin became a company commander in the 2nd Zaamur Border Infantry Regiment. In 1917, he was seriously wounded in battle, resulting in his demobilization the next year.



General Fyodor Tolbukhin, commander of Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

In autumn 1918, Tolbukhin joined the Red Army, becoming a military commissar in the Yaroslavl Province. In 1919, after graduating from a staff service school in Smolensk, he took a more active role in the Russian Civil War. Tolbukhin fulfilled various roles on the staff of the 56th Infantry Division in battles around Petrograd, in Poland and in Karelia. In 1927 and 1929, he completed courses at the M. V. Frunze Military Academy. In 1930, Tolbukhin became the chief of staff of I Rifle Corps, and then five years later chief of staff of IX Rifle Corps – both located in the Leningrad Military District. In 1937, he briefly commanded the 72nd Infantry Division in the Kiev Military District, before he was reassigned the following year as the chief of staff of the Transcaucasian Front.

In 1941, after the USSR was attacked by Nazi Germany, Tolbukhin oversaw the planning and execution of the Soviet part of the Anglo-Soviet occupation of Iran. As chief of staff of the Caucasian Front, and then the Crimean Front, he planned Soviet amphibious landings to try to retake Crimea as part of the Soviet winter counteroffensive. In early 1942, Tolbukhin was fired for incompetence when Soviet forces proved unable to seize the entire peninsula. Later that year, he took command of Fifty-Seventh Army that made an important contribution at Stalingrad. In 1943, Tolbukhin took command of Southern Front, which was later renamed 4th Ukrainian Front. In early 1944, he was transferred to take over 3rd Ukrainian Front.

## AMERICAN

**Major General Nathan F. Twining (1897–1982).** The son of a banker, Twining was born in Monroe, Wisconsin. His family moved to Oregon where he graduated from Lincoln High School in Portland. In 1916, he joined the Third Oregon Infantry Regiment as a private in the National Guard. Twining took part in the Mexican Punitive Expedition. In 1917, already a sergeant, he obtained an appointment to the US Military Academy at West Point and graduated as a second lieutenant in just a year and a half because of the accelerated classes during World War I. During 1919, Twining briefly joined the American Forces in Germany before he returned to attend the Infantry

Training School at Fort Benning, Georgia. He served as a general's aide for the next few years at various posts.



Major General Nathan Twining (at the bottom of the ladder), commander of the US Fifteenth Air Force (photo taken in 1945). (Bettmann/Getty Images)

In 1923, Twining began training as a pilot, first at the Primary Flying School and then at the Advanced Flying School, both located in Texas. For the next few years, he served as a flying instructor first in Texas and then in California. After 1929, Twining became the adjutant for personnel and then the commander of the 26th Attack Squadron. In 1936, he graduated from the Air Tactical School, and the next year he finished courses at the Command and General Staff College. In 1940, he was promoted to assistant chief of the Inspection Division of the Office of the Chief of the Air Corps in Washington, DC.

After the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941, Twining bounced around to different positions in the same office before being

assigned as chief of staff of Army Forces in the South Pacific Area. At the start of 1943, he was promoted to head the Thirteenth Air Force in the Pacific, but near the end of the year he was transferred to command the Fifteenth Air Force in Italy. Soon afterward, Twining also took on the role of the commander of Mediterranean Allied Strategic Air Forces. He coordinated the sustained Allied bombing campaign against Romania.



# OPPOSING FORCES

## AXIS

The retreat of German forces into Romania created a complex and complicated Axis command structure. Antonescu designated the unoccupied portions of Moldavia and Bessarabia, plus Dobruja along the coast, as the operational zone. A German–Romanian agreement further divided the operational zone into the front zone and the support zone. German Army Group South Ukraine had responsibility to command German and Romanian front-line units while OKH created the North Romania Commander to co-ordinate German and Romanian support units. The remainder of the country, Wallachia and southern Transylvania, was under Romanian civilian administration. The German Military Mission to Romania, which had been established nearly four years earlier, controlled German forces located outside of the operational zone reporting to Oberkommando der Wehrmacht (OKW), or Wehrmacht High Command. The umbrella German Military Mission oversaw missions for the army, Luftwaffe (air force) and Kriegsmarine (navy). It became responsible for resolving issues between German Army Group South Ukraine and the Romanian General Staff. The chief of the German Military Mission in Romania, General Erik Hansen, represented OKW's political and economic interests in the country too. Up to this point, OKW had co-ordinated other fronts while OKH had run the Eastern Front, but now the two staffs shared the responsibility for defending Romania. The dysfunctional relationship between OKW and OKH only added to the difficulties facing Axis forces in Romania.

The German–Romanian alliance added a further complicating factor to Axis command in Romania. Antonescu had opposed the subordination of his armies to German Army Group South Ukraine and had demanded the formation of a Romanian army group, similar to the command arrangement in Romania four years earlier at the outset of the war with the USSR, but Hitler did not want to put German forces under even titular command of a

Romanian ally. Therefore, the two sides agreed to a compromise. Under German Army Group South Ukraine, OKH created two subordinate formations (sometimes referred to as sub-army groups): German Army Group Wöhler consisting of German Eighth Army and Romanian Fourth Army in Moldavia under the command of General Wöhler; and Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu comprising German Sixth Army and Romanian Third Army in Bessarabia under the command of General Dumitrescu. The Romanians had an army group, but the Germans retained overall command. German Army Group South Ukraine could issue orders of only a tactical nature to Romanian units while all other decisions still had to go through the Romanian General Staff, however. Finally, German Luftflotte 4, reinforced by Romanian squadrons, provided air support.



A mixed German (two soldiers on the left) and Romanian (three soldiers on the right) crew man an anti-tank gun in the Carpathian foothills in northern Moldavia in early 1944. (Photo by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

The character of each subordinate Axis army group was different. In the case of German Army Group Wöhler, the two armies were amalgamated on a grand scale with German divisions assigned to Romanian corps and vice versa. The small German Eighth Army had been battered badly during its retreat from Ukraine and needed Romanian units to fill the gaps in its line on

the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. The Romanian Fourth Army, on the other hand, was large but primarily filled with recently mobilized, hurriedly trained and poorly equipped recruits, so it required German ‘corset stays’ to strengthen its line – especially because it held a crucial sector on the Iași front blocking the way south into Moldavia. Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu did not really amalgamate. The large German Sixth Army, reconstituted after the original force was encircled and destroyed at Stalingrad, held the front between the Prut and Dniester rivers and along the Dniester River protecting Chișinău. The small Romanian Third Army defended only the lower banks of the Dniester to the sea and guarded the coast against a Soviet amphibious landing to outflank the Axis line. Consequently, General Wöhler controlled the most important Romanian forces while General Dumitrescu had limited ability to enforce his will on the most substantial grouping of German forces.



Romanian and German prisoners of war captured by Red Army troops during the liberation of Crimea in April 1944. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

German Army Group South Ukraine underwent a vexing transformation that summer. The Soviet summer offensive had shattered the German line in Byelorussia, so OKH transferred desperately needed panzer units from German Army Group South Ukraine to reinforce German Army Group

Centre. Much of German Luftflotte 4 was also sent north. By August, nine panzer and panzergrenadier divisions had shrunk to just three (two panzer and one panzergrenadier), which were all seriously understrength or lacking functioning panzers and assault guns. The Romanian Army could field only a single armoured division. The summer lull in Romania enabled German infantry divisions to be brought up to strength. German Army Group South mustered 800,000 soldiers, approximately 380,000 Germans and 420,000 Romanians, in the operational zone. Additionally, the Romanian General Staff had another 657,000 Romanian troops behind the front. Romania had mobilized well over 1 million men, many of whom were mere boys, for the final defence of the country. Meanwhile, the German Military Mission in Romania had roughly 71,000 German troops spread across the country with most concentrated around the oilfields in Ploești. Nonetheless, the Axis armies in Romania consisted of almost entirely footbound infantry or horse-drawn support units.

## **SOVIET**

The Soviet command structure was far simpler with Stavka in firm control. After having transferred forces to support the attack into Byelorussia, Stavka reinforced the fronts in Romania. The more substantial Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front under General Malinovsky soon boasted the Soviet Fortieth, Seventh Guards, Twenty-Seventh, Sixth Tank, Fifty-Second, Fifty-Third, Fourth Guards and Fifth Air Armies in northern Moldavia and northern Bessarabia. The less powerful Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front under General Tolbukhin had the Fifth Shock, Fifty-Seventh, Thirty-Seventh, Forty-Sixth and Seventeenth Air Armies along the Dniester. In addition, Stavka added units of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and Soviet Danube Flotilla to support the coming attack with an amphibious flanking manoeuvre. The Soviets also used the summer pause to bring their units up to strength pulling in hundreds of thousands of fresh recruits conscripted from recently liberated regions of Ukraine. In comparison to the almost panzer-less enemy, the Soviets had six tank or mechanized corps. In total, the two Soviet fronts assembled 930,000 troops on the front. Another 320,000 Soviet troops were in the rear area.



Red Army units cross the Romanian border at the start of the first Iași–Chișinău offensive in March 1944. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The Soviet commanders enjoyed another intangible advantage: a growing belief in victory. After more than a year and a half of offensives liberating all pre-war Soviet territory, as well as beginning to reconquer Baltic, Polish, and Romanian territory the USSR had annexed in 1939 and 1940, Soviet soldiers were finally becoming confident in the Red Army's ability to defeat the German Army. Moreover, the Soviets knew approximately half of the enemy force opposite were Romanians who did not inspire nearly as much fear as Germans. But even Hitler's legions had also lost the last visages of their aura of invincibility by now. Soviet troops could look forward to the coming offensive in confident, high spirits.

## **ORDERS OF BATTLE, 19 AUGUST 1944**

### **AXIS**

#### **Army Group South Ukraine – Generaloberst Johannes Friessner**

---

**German Army Group Wöhler – General der Infanterie Otto Wöhler**

German Eighth Army – General der Infanterie Otto Wöhler



German XVII Mountain Corps (General der Gebirgstruppe Hans Kreysing)

German 8th Jäger Division

German 3rd Mountain Division

Romanian 3rd and 6th Grăniceri Regiments

Romanian IV Corps (General de divizie Nicolae Stoenescu)

Romanian 7th Infantry Division

German 79th Infantry Division

Romanian 5th Cavalry Division

Romanian 102nd Mountain Command

German IV Corps (General der Infanterie Friedrich Mieth)

Romanian 11th Infantry Division

German 376th Infantry Division

Romanian Fourth Army – General de corp de armată Mihail Racoviță (acting commander)

General de corp de armată Gheorghe Avramescu)

Romanian VII Corps (General de divizie Hugo Schwab)

Romanian 17th Infantry Division

Romanian 8th Grăniceri Regiment

Romanian 104th Mountain Command

Romanian 103rd Mountain Command

Romanian I Corps (General de corp de armată Radu Gherghe)

Romanian 6th Infantry Division

Romanian 20th Infantry Division

Romanian V Corps (General de corp de armată Constantin Niculescu)

Romanian Guard Division

Romanian 4th Infantry Division

German 46th Infantry Division

Romanian 1st Infantry Division

Romanian VI Corps (General de corp de armată Gheorghe Avramescu [acting commander

General der Infanterie Erich Abraham])

Romanian 5th Infantry Division

German 76th Infantry Division

Romanian 101st Mountain Command

German LVII Panzer Corps (General der Panzertruppe Friedrich Kirchner)

Romanian 13th Infantry Division

Romanian 8th Infantry Division

Romanian 1st 'România Mare' Armoured Division

Romanian 3rd Infantry Division

Romanian 18th Mountain Division

German 20th Panzer Division

**Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu – General de armată Petre Dumitrescu**

German Sixth Army – General der Artillerie Maximilian Fretter-Pico

German VII Corps (General der Artillerie Ernst-Eberhard Hell)

German 106th Infantry Division

German 370th Infantry Division

Romanian 14th Infantry Division

German XXXIV Corps (Generalleutnant Ludwig Müller)

German 62nd Infantry Division

German 282nd Infantry Division

German 335th Infantry Division

German LII Corps (General der Infanterie Erich Buschenhagen)

German 161st Infantry Division  
 German 294th Infantry Division  
 German 320th Infantry Division  
 German 384th Infantry Division  
 German XXX Corps (Generalleutnant Georg-Wilhelm Postel)  
 German 302nd Infantry Division  
 German 257th Infantry Division  
 German 15th Infantry Division  
 German 306th Infantry Division  
 German LXXII Corps (General der Infanterie Sigismund von Förster)  
 German 13th Panzer Division  
 German 258th Infantry Division  
 Romanian 1st Cavalry Division  
 Romanian Third Army – General de armată Petre Dumitrescu  
 German XXIX Corps (Generalleutnant Anton von Bechtoldsheim)  
 Romanian 4th Mountain Division  
 Romanian 21st Infantry Division  
 German 9th Infantry Division  
 Romanian III Corps (General de corps de armată Emanoil Leoveanu)  
 Romanian 15th Infantry Division  
 Romania 2nd Infantry Division  
 Romanian 110th Infantry Brigade  
 German 10th Panzergrenadier Division  
 German 153rd Feldausbildungs Division  
 German 97th Jäger Division (being transferred)

## SOVIET

### **Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front – Generál armii Rodion Malinovsky**

---

#### **Soviet Fortieth Army – Generál-leytenánt Filip Zhmachenko**

Soviet L Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Pavel Batitsky)

Soviet 240th Rifle Division

Soviet 71st Rifle Division

Soviet LI Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Ilya Lyubovtsev)

Soviet 42nd Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 232nd Rifle Division

Soviet 133rd Rifle Division

Soviet 38th Rifle Division

Soviet 38th Rifle Division

#### **Soviet Seventh Guards Army – Generál-leytenánt Mikhail Shumilov**

Soviet XXV Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Ganiy Safiulin)

Soviet 36th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 6th Guards Airborne Division

Soviet 53rd Rifle Division

Soviet XXIV Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Petr Avdeenko)

Soviet 72nd Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 6th Rifle Division

Soviet 81st Guards Rifle Division

**Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army – Generál-leytenánt Sergei Trofimenko**

Soviet XXXIII Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Aleksey Semyonov)

Soviet 337th Rifle Division

Soviet 78th Rifle Division

Soviet XXXV Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Sergey Goryachev)

Soviet 93rd Guards Rifle Division

Soviet CIV Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Aleksandr Petrushevsky)

Soviet 163rd Rifle Division

Soviet 206th Rifle Division

Soviet 27th Guards Tank Brigade

**Soviet Sixth Tank Army – Generál-leytenánt Andry Kravchenko**

Soviet V Guards Tank Corps (Generál-leytenánt Vasilii Alexeiev)

Soviet 20th Guard Tank Brigade

Soviet 21st Guard Tank Brigade

Soviet 22nd Guard Tank Brigade

Soviet 6th Guard Motor Rifle Brigade

Soviet V Mechanized Corps (Generál-leytenánt Mikhail Volkov)

Soviet 2nd Mechanized Brigade

Soviet 9th Mechanized Brigade

Soviet 45th Mechanized Brigade

Soviet XVIII Tank Corps (Generál-mayór Vasily Polozkov)

Soviet 110th Tank Brigade

Soviet 170th Tank Brigade

Soviet 181st Tank Brigade

Soviet 32nd Motor Rifle Brigade

**Soviet Fifty-Second Army – Generál-leytenánt Konstantin Koroteev**

Soviet LXXIII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Sarkis Martirosyan)

Soviet 116th Rifle Division

Soviet 213th Rifle Division

Soviet 373th Rifle Division

Soviet 294th Rifle Division

Soviet XXXXVIII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Zinovy Rogozny)

Soviet 213th Rifle Division

Soviet 111th Rifle Division

Soviet 50th Rifle Division

Soviet 343rd Rifle Division

Soviet XXI Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Petr Fomenko)

Soviet 69th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 62nd Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 254th Rifle Division

Soviet 373rd Rifle Division

Soviet 254th Rifle Division

**Soviet Fifty-Third Army – Generál-leytenánt Ivan Managarov**

Soviet XXXXIX Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Gurij Terentiev)

Soviet 110th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 375th Rifle Division

Soviet 25th Guards Rifle Division

**Soviet Fourth Guards Army – Generál-leytenánt Ivan Galanin**

Soviet XX Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Nikolay Biryukov)

Soviet 5th Guards Airborne Division  
Soviet 41st Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 80th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 7th Guards Airborne Division  
Soviet 84th Rifle Division  
Soviet LXXVIII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Georgiy Latyshev)  
Soviet 303rd Rifle Division  
Soviet 31st Rifle Division  
Soviet 21st Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 252nd Rifle Division  
Soviet XXIII Tank Corps (Generál-mayór Aleksey Akhmanov)  
Soviet LVII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Fyodor Ostashenko)  
Soviet 1st 'Tudor Vladimirescu' Romanian Volunteer Infantry Division  
Soviet 214th Rifle Division  
**Soviet Fifth Air Army**

## **Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front – Generál armii Fyodor Tolbukhin**

---

### **Soviet Fifth Shock Army – Generál-polkóvnik Nikolay Berzarin**

Soviet XXXII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Dmitriy Zherebin)  
Soviet 60th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 416th Rifle Division  
Soviet 295th Rifle Division  
Soviet XXVI Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Pavel Firsov)  
Soviet 94th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 89th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 248th Rifle Division  
Soviet 266th Rifle Division

### **Soviet Fifty-Seventh Army – Generál-leytenánt Nikolai Gagen**

Soviet XXXXXVIth Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Mikhail Anashkin)  
Soviet 73rd Rifle Division  
Soviet 52nd Rifle Division  
Soviet 19th Rifle Division  
Soviet IX Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Ivan Roslyi)  
Soviet 301st Rifle Division  
Soviet 230th Rifle Division  
Soviet 113th Rifle Division  
Soviet 96th Tank Brigade

### **Soviet Thirty-Seventh Army – Generál-leytenánt Mikhail Sharokhin**

Soviet LXXXII Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Pavel Kuznetsov)  
Soviet 28th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 92nd Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet XI Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-leytenánt Grigoryy Kotov)  
Soviet 195th Rifle Division  
Soviet 20th Guards Rifle Division  
Soviet 10th Guards Airborne Division  
Soviet LXVI Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Dmitry Kupriianov)  
Soviet 333rd Rifle Division  
Soviet 195th Rifle Division  
Soviet 61st Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 244th Rifle Division

**Soviet Forty-Sixth Army – Generál-leytenánt Ivan Shlemin**

Soviet XXXIV Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Ivan Kosobutsky)

Soviet 394th Rifle Division

Soviet 353rd Rifle Division

Soviet 259th Rifle Division

Soviet 236th Rifle Division

Soviet XXXI Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Sergey Bobruk)

Soviet 4th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 40th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 34th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet XXXVII Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Sergey Gorokhov)

Soviet 108th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet 320th Rifle Division

Soviet 59th Guards Rifle Division

Soviet VII Mechanized Corps (Generál-mayór Fyodor Katkov)

Soviet XXXI Guards Rifle Corps (Generál-mayór Konstantin Skorobogatkin)

Soviet 188th Rifle Division

**Soviet Seventeenth Air Army**

# OPPOSING PLANS

## AXIS

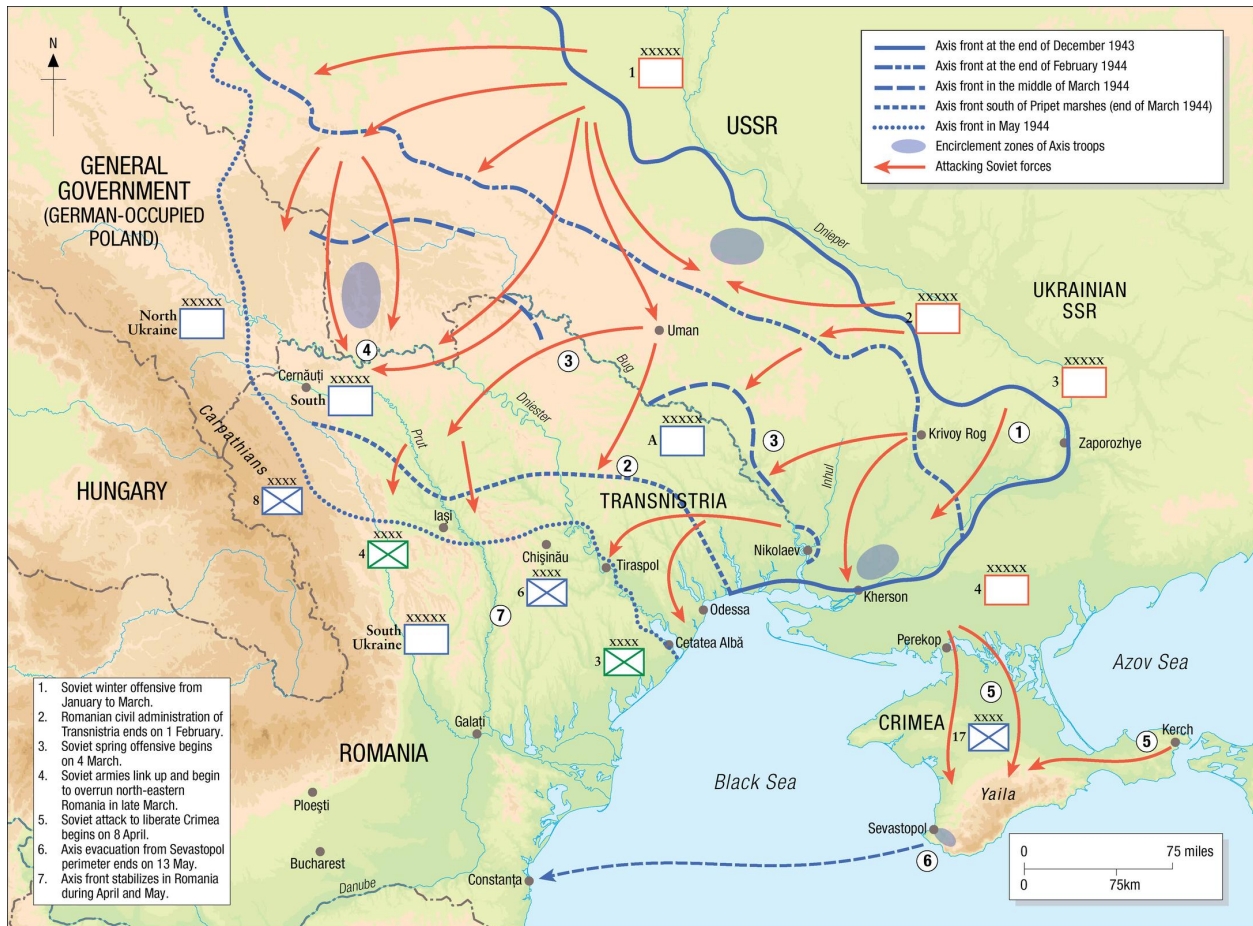
The Axis had long since lost the strategic initiative on the Eastern Front. Moreover, the withdrawal of German panzers limited the operational initiative of German Army Group South Ukraine in Romania, which could no longer consider spoiling attacks. Consequently, Axis plans could be only defensive in nature. Both German and Romanian commanders knew it was only a matter of time before the next Soviet offensive, but the two sides disagreed on when the enemy might attack and where Axis forces should make the stand. The difference in opinion put more pressure on the already strained German–Romanian alliance.

Yet Nazi Germany and Romania still needed each other. On 20 July, Hitler survived an assassination attempt by a conspiracy led by German Army officers. The general reaction in the Romanian Army to the bomb plot was not disappointment but relief – because the Führer had survived, Romanian soldiers assumed Nazi Germany would continue to keep fighting rather than sign an armistice abandoning Romania to the Soviet Union. Yet the leadership of both countries knew that the fraying German–Romanian alliance must be close to snapping. Hitler had plans to occupy Romania and install a puppet fascist government, if necessary, as it had in northern Italy the year before and Hungary just a few months before. Antonescu also had plans to resist any such effort on the part of his ally. Nevertheless, the Romanians had proved themselves firm allies of the Germans, so the Führer did not want to sow disorder in Romania unnecessarily. Nazi Germany relied on the Romanian Army to help the German Army to hold the southern flank of the Eastern Front that enabled the Nazi war machine to continue to be fuelled by deliveries of oil from Romania, resources extracted from occupied Yugoslavia, Albania and Greece, and trade with Turkey.





A Tiger tank of the German Grossdeutschland Panzergrenadier Division loaded onto a flatcar for transport out of Romania to elsewhere on the Eastern Front. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 101I-732-0133-34)



Southern flank of the Eastern Front, spring 1944

In addition to Hitler's escape from death, a change in command signalled a need for a meeting with Antonescu for the two dictators to agree on the Axis plan to defend Romania. On 25 July, General Johannes Friessner took command of German Army Group South Ukraine; he swapped places with General Ferdinand Schörner who now headed German Army Group North. The new German commander arrived under a cloud because he had not been able to hold on in the Baltic region, so he had a lot to prove to the Führer in being able to hold the line in Romania. As he toured the front, Friessner was dismayed to find the army group denuded of German panzers and was frustrated by the confusing command arrangement. Coincidentally, on 31 July, General Mihail Racoviță, the commander of the Romanian Fourth Army, went on leave. In his place, General Gheorghe Avramescu, who led Romanian VI Corps, became acting army commander (a German division commander took over his corps). After inspecting the front, Friessner wrote a letter to Hitler expressing his concern about the political situation in Romania

and asking for all German troops in Romania to be placed under his centralized command. He assured the Führer that German Army Group South Ukraine could hold the front with the forces already available so long as Romania remained loyal.

On 4 August, Hitler's military advisers gathered to discuss the situation in Romania. Marshal Wilhelm Keitel, chief of the OKW, together with Generals Alfred Jodl, Heinz Guderian and Walther Wenck, listened to an OKH report. Since Axis forces had stymied the Soviet advance during the first Iași–Chișinău offensive four months earlier, German Army Group South Ukraine had been working on a series of fortifications to strengthen the front. German and Romanian military engineers used tens of thousands of civilians, including local Jews organized into segregated labour detachments by the Romanian General Staff, to construct trenches, dig anti-tank ditches, build concrete bunkers and lay barbed wire. Axis defences consisted of three lines: the Dacia Line was the forward line of resistance, the Trajan Line was the main line of resistance anchored on defensive heights, and the Decebal Line was the second line of resistance to the rear as a fallback position. OKH did not believe even these defences could hold against a massive Soviet offensive, however, in particular if Romania abandoned the Axis.

Accordingly, OKH suggested ceding most of the rest of Moldavia to the Soviets and withdrawing to a position between the Siret and Danube rivers. There Axis forces would hold the Focșani–Nămolosa–Brăila (FNB) Line across the 90km-wide Focșani Gap, which was the gateway to the plains of Wallachia. The Romanian Army had constructed the FNB Line after the Soviet occupation of northern Bukovina and Bessarabia four years earlier in case Stalin decided to try to overrun the rest of Romania. Now only three Romanian battalion-strength detachments manned the fortifications of the FNB Line. Yet Hitler opposed the idea. The Führer did authorize German Army Group South Ukraine to retreat to the FNB Line if OKH detected signs of a major Soviet offensive. At this time, OKW believed Stavka lacked the resources to mount such an enterprise because it was busy fighting German Army Group Centre in Byelorussia. Moreover, Keitel rejected the idea of centralizing control of the forces of the German Military Mission in Romania under the headquarters of German Army Group South Ukraine. In other words, Hitler and his generals decided that Axis forces in Romania should hold on and hope for the best.

The Germans still needed to convince the Romanians of the wisdom of this plan. The eleventh, and ultimately final, meeting between the two dictators and their respective entourages occurred on 5–6 August at the Wolfsschanze (‘Wolf’s Lair’) near Rastenburg in East Prussia. The discussion between Hitler and Antonescu on the first day became tense as the Führer questioned Romania’s commitment to keep fighting and the conducător questioned Nazi Germany’s ability to shield his country from the ongoing American bombing campaign and the anticipated Soviet offensive. The Germans were aware of the Romanians’ peace feelers to the Western Allies and abortive talks with the Soviets. Hitler told Antonescu the Soviets would not allow the Americans and the British to land in the Balkans, so the Romanians should not expect salvation from that direction – only the Germans could prevent the Soviets from dominating south-eastern Europe.

The Romanians were not as sanguine as the Germans about the Soviets’ alleged inability to launch another offensive in Romania. When Antonescu learned of the plan to withdraw to the FNB Line if a serious Soviet offensive threatened, he not only supported it but argued in favour of doing so sooner rather than later. Antonescu also argued that the shortened front would not need so many infantry divisions, thus allowing more German units to be redeployed elsewhere on the Eastern Front. Hitler refused Antonescu’s suggestion. Hitler’s instinct was as always to hold on as long as possible. Moreover, the Führer suspected that the conducător was conniving to reduce the size of German forces in his country so Romania could more easily abandon the Axis. Despite these suspicions, Hitler and his generals believed Antonescu remained a loyal ally, a belief that was proved correct by subsequent events.

Immediately after the meeting between Hitler and Antonescu, reports began to come in to German Army Group South Ukraine of a Soviet build-up along the Iași front. On 9 August, the chief of the Romanian General Staff, General Ilie Ștefleă, met with the chief of staff of German Army Group South Ukraine to discuss the decisions taken at Rastenburg and the need to prepare the FNB Line. Romanian efforts to restore and expand the fortifications across the Focșani Gap intensified but were plagued by shortages of labour and materiel. Yet even after another Soviet concentration was detected on the Dniester a week later, OKH remained convinced Stavka was preparing only for a local counter-attack around Iași. In fact, time was running out for the Axis.

## SOVIET

After pausing plans for another offensive against German Army Group South Ukraine, Stavka calculated it now had the resources to mount a decisive assault in Romania, especially with the Red Army having so much success against German Army Group Centre in Byelorussia. On 15 July, General Malinovsky and General Tolbukhin received instructions to begin planning a second Iași–Chișinău offensive. The Stavka plan envisioned twin breakthroughs from the north to seize Iași and Chișinău, followed by an encirclement of German Sixth Army, and then a drive south to the Focșani Gap where Soviet forces could burst through into southern Romania seizing the capital Bucharest and the oilfields and oil refineries around Ploești.

The two front commanders fleshed out and even altered the Stavka plan over the next few days. General Malinovsky's Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front would deliver the main blow in a sector of front held by Romanian troops between Târgu Frumos and Iași. After his forces took the city, they would thrust down the Prut river valley, which was wider and thus more favourable for armour than the Siret river valley. General Tolbukhin's Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front would deliver the supporting blow. He disagreed with the original idea of a direct attack from the north on Chișinău, however. Tolbukhin favoured an attack from the east out of a bridgehead over the Dniester. The enemy expected a Soviet attack from the Tiraspol bridgehead, so he advocated using the Chițcani bridgehead a bit farther south to provide an element of surprise. Additionally, this sector was at the junction between German and Romanian armies. His forces would ignore Chișinău and focus on a south-westerly drive to the Prut toward Huși on the western bank of the Prut. There the two Soviet fronts would link up. After submitting their provisional plan, Stavka summoned Malinovsky and Tolbukhin to a conference on 31 July to agree on a final plan.



At an air base in Soviet Ukraine used by American aircraft, an American airman shakes hands with his Soviet counterpart over a pile of bombs addressed 'to Hitler' in English and Russian respectively. (SuperStock/Alamy Stock Photo)

Stalin approved the new concept. On 2 August, a Stavka directive went out to Generals Malinovsky and Tolbukhin to move forward with the detailed planning for the offensive. A few hours later, the two front commanders along with their respective staffs and subordinate army commanders gathered for a conference on the front. There they were greeted by Marshal Semyon Timoshenko whom Stalin had appointed as the Stavka co-ordinator for the second Iași–Chișinău offensive. Timoshenko was there to keep things on track and resolve any differences between the two front commanders. He had a long and close relationship with Stalin, so when he spoke it was as if 'the Boss' (*Vozhd*) spoke.

That same day, Stavka relayed a request to US Strategic Air Forces in Europe, which included US Eighth Air Force in England and US Fifteenth

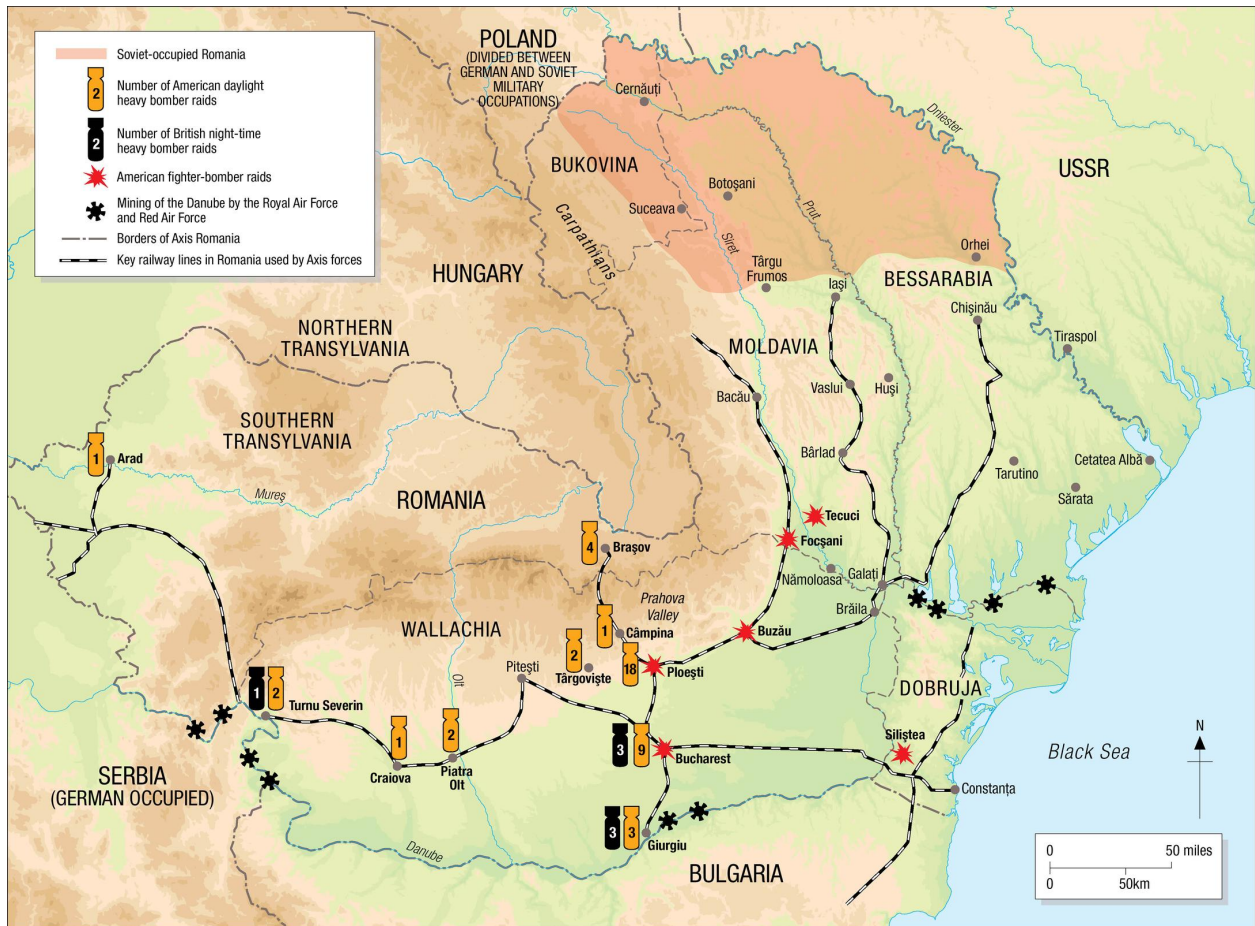


Air Force in southern Italy. The Soviets wanted the Americans to attack a dozen Axis airfields just south of the front in Romania with fighter-bombers and heavy bombers. The Soviets, suspicious and secretive, did not inform the Americans of the upcoming offensive. In late July, the US Fifteenth Air Force had already carried out three attacks with fighter-bombers on Axis airfields in Romania and carried out three more in early August. These were 'shuttle missions' from southern Italy to western Ukraine and back again; part of Operation *Frantic*, which lasted from June 1944 to September 1944, in which the Soviets provided airfields to the Americans to expand the range of strategic bombing. On 8 August, however, General Nathan Twining, commander of the US Fifteenth Air Force, called off further low-level strafing attacks on enemy airfields with fighter-bombers for being too costly. Nevertheless, the American fighter-bomber raids on airfields, plus the heavy bomber attacks on oil targets, had wrecked German Luftflotte 4 and the Romanian Air Force, and a day earlier the Romanian Air Force had suspended fighter operations. The Romanians knew the Axis fighters could not break through the American fighter screen protecting the bombers and decided to husband all remaining aircraft and aircrew for the anticipated Soviet offensive. General Twining's bombers continued to hammer Ploești against only ineffective German fighter opposition – except for one last combined German–Romanian effort on 18 August resulting in serious losses for the Axis defenders. Consequently, Stavka could count on air superiority over Romania for the second Iași–Chișinău offensive.



An American Flying Fortress heavy bomber strikes the Arad Car Works on the main railway line between Budapest and Bucharest in July 1944. (Photo12/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

In addition to ground and air, the Soviet plan contained a sea component. On 11–12 August, General Tolbukhin put the finishing touches to plans for an amphibious assault by the Soviet Black Sea Fleet and Soviet Danube Flotilla to support the ground assault of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front. The goal was to isolate most of the Romanian Third Army between the Danube and the Dniester in southern Bessarabia. A landing by the Soviet Black Sea Fleet across the wide Dniester estuary to seize the old fortress city of Cetatea Albă would take place a day after the ground assault started. Then several days later, the Soviet Danube Flotilla would land troops at the mouth of the northern branch of the Danube delta to cut off the enemy's retreat.



Combined Bomber Offensive of Romania, April–August 1944



A formation of American Liberator heavy bombers fly over the Concordia Vega Oil refinery in Ploesti. (Photo12/Universal Images Group/Getty Images)

Final Soviet preparations proceeded relatively smoothly. The two Soviet fronts filled depleted ranks with new recruits, trained soldiers for the coming offensive, built roads and brought forward ammunition and materiel. Marshal Timoshenko, General Malinovsky and General Tolbukhin could feel confident about the fast-approaching offensive. Axis ground forces had nearly been stripped of all armour to respond to Soviet threats elsewhere on the Eastern Front while Axis air forces had almost been driven from the skies of Romania by American raids. Romania was ripe for the picking.



A Romanian anti-aircraft unit on the Black Sea coast prepares for action. (Keystone/Getty Images)

# THE CAMPAIGN

The Soviet concentrations were impossible to hide from German Army Group South Ukraine – especially on the Iași front. Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front had 771,200 soldiers, 11,000 guns and mortars, and 1,283 tanks and self-propelled guns, arranged in two echelons. General Malinovsky concentrated half his infantry and artillery and over three-quarters of his tanks into a sector 25km wide between Târgu Frumos and the Prut opposite the centre of the Romanian Fourth Army. Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front had 523,000 soldiers, 8,000 guns and mortars, and 600 tanks and self-propelled guns. General Tolbukhin packed nearly three-quarters of his infantry and artillery and practically all his tanks into a sector 11km wide in the bridgeheads on the Dniester opposite the right flank of the German Sixth Army. Each Soviet front would commit all its aircraft to control the sky above its breakthrough sector. Even with limited reconnaissance capacity, German Army Group South Ukraine could not fail to notice the Soviet build-up on the front. Additionally, it detected increased Soviet naval radio traffic and Soviet naval efforts to de-mine the sea around Odessa. In fact, by 18 August, General Friessner, at his headquarters in Slănic, and OKH both knew a Soviet offensive could occur at any time.

Nevertheless, General Friessner took almost no precautions to meet the expected enemy assault. While the Romanians viewed the Soviet dispositions, especially the fact that ‘the forces facing the Germans are weak’ while ‘the forces facing the Romanians are strong’, with great alarm, the Germans were less concerned about the Soviet threat. The Germans anticipated only a local Soviet attack around Iași and dismissed the Romanians as alarmist. Routine remained the order of the day in German Army Group South Ukraine. Axis troops continued normal training, their usual daily chores, daily physical fitness, etc. Whether due to wishful thinking or fatalism or a mixture of both, Friessner and his staff did not place Axis troops on alert for a possible enemy assault. After some hesitation, Friessner’s chief of staff decided to relocate the German 10th



Panzer Grenadier Division from Cornești in Bessarabia across the Prut to near Iași in Moldavia. This decision provided the Romanian Fourth Army with an extra mobile reserve but left the German Sixth Army even more exposed. To a certain extent Friessner's inaction was because he simply lacked options. German Army Group South Ukraine had been stripped of most of its panzers and Hitler refused to allow it to withdraw to the FNB Line. Yet even had Friessner received permission to withdraw his army group, there is doubt that he could have done so successfully. The Soviets would have attacked to disrupt the Axis withdrawal. A fighting retreat is difficult and would have been only further complicated by having to co-ordinate a mixed German–Romanian force of mostly infantry being harried by a more mobile enemy. The Americans would have bombed the transportation network to slow the Axis retreat as well. In any case, German Army Group South Ukraine stayed in place as Friessner hoped for the best.

The calm that had settled on the front in Romania for several months broke on 19 August as the two Soviet fronts began to probe the Axis army group's defences. Coincidentally, that same day, US Fifteenth Air Force conducted what would prove to be its final attack against Romania to 'finish off Ploești and keep the fires burning', as an American report put it. In the morning, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front attacked German XXIX Corps, a mixed force of one German and two Romanian divisions on the German Sixth Army's right flank, from the Chițcani bridgehead on the Dniester. Later, after noon, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front targeted German VII Corps between Cornești and Orhei on the German Sixth Army's left flank in Bessarabia. At the same time, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front hit the Romanian Fourth Army and the German Eighth Army's right flank in Moldavia. Only the German Eighth Army's left flank along the Carpathian foothills remained quiet. While Axis troops repelled most of the Soviet company- and battalion-strength attacks, German and Romanian defences began to crack. Soviet forces even penetrated the line in places. German VII Corps counter-attacked and restored its front in Bessarabia, so the German Sixth Army seemed secure. The Romanian Fourth Army did not fare so well in Moldavia, however. In its centre, Romanian VI Corps had to withdraw the Romanian 5th Infantry Division, but it counter-attacked with aid from German LVII Panzer Corps. The colonel of the Romanian 8th Infantry Regiment leading a reserve battalion was killed, but the Soviet attack was halted by 6.30pm. Meanwhile, on its left flank, the Soviet Seventh Guards Army drove forward on either side of the Siret into

Romanian I and V Corps. While Romanian V Corps was able to repel the enemy, Romanian I Corps was unsuccessful despite the aid of the German 20th Panzer Division. Thus, after just an afternoon, German Army Group South Ukraine showed worrying signs of collapse – especially along the Romanian-held Iași front.



Romanian officers and a German colonel identify enemy positions on the Iași front in July 1944. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

Soviet pressure did not let up as night fell. Later that evening Marshal Timoshenko and General Malinovsky, along with his operations staff, relocated to a forward command post on a hill overlooking Iași to direct Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front's attack. Around the same time, General Tolbukhin met with his subordinates one last time, after which he went to sleep in his headquarters while his operations staff crossed over to a forward command post in the Chițcani bridgehead to prepare Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front's assault. Soviet patrols multiplied during the night. Soviet pioneers (engineers) cleared mines and cut barbed wire to create lanes for the infantry and tanks. Special Soviet aircraft nicknamed 'rippers' cut Axis telephone lines. Axis aircraft bombed enemy positions near Iași but with little effect. General Friessner believed he had identified this as the Soviet main effort. German LVII Corps moved the Romanian 1st Armoured Division forward toward Podul Iloaiei, dividing the Romanian tanks into two battle groups and reinforcing both with a German assault gun detachment each, behind the Romanian 1st and 5th Infantry Divisions. A counter-attack by these two

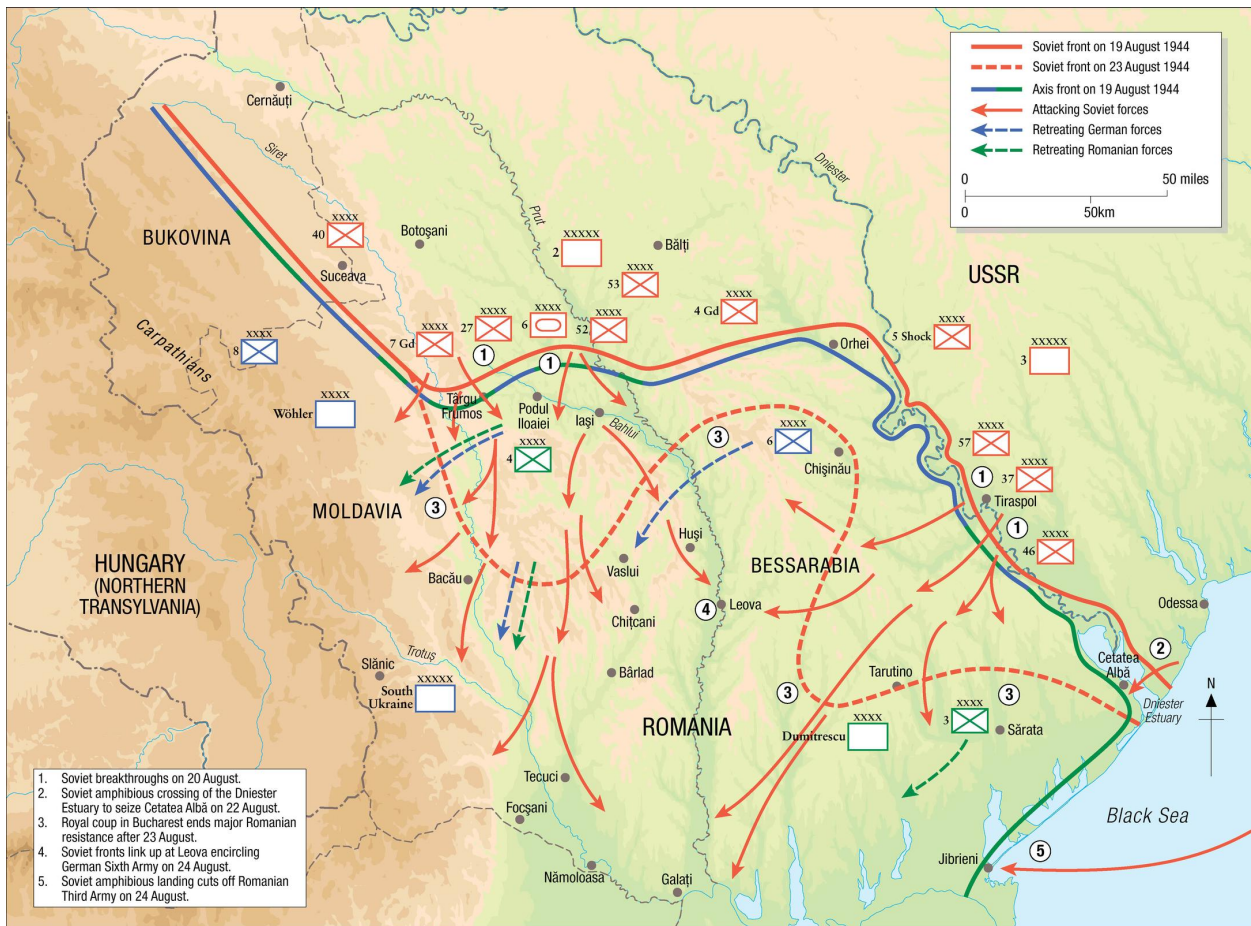
Romanian–German armoured battle groups would hopefully restore the line and disrupt the coming Soviet attack.

## **SOVIET ATTACK**

On 20 August, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front's guns roared to life at 5.15am. Soviet artillery hammered Axis positions north of Podul Iloaiei and Iași for nearly two hours. The exhausted Romanian 5th Infantry Division was caught in the open because it had launched a counter-attack some 45 minutes earlier. Soviet artillery cut telephone lines interrupting communication between Axis units on the front and with headquarters to the rear. Immediately following the bombardment, the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army attacked Romanian VI Corps aiming for Podul Iloaiei while the Soviet Fifty-Second Army attacked Romanian IV Corps aiming for Iași. 'The air was burning,' one Romanian second lieutenant remembered later, as Soviet tanks and infantry advanced behind a rolling barrage of artillery and beneath waves of aircraft. Both Soviet front commanders had dedicated all their air assets to the breakthrough sectors; 1,952 Soviet fighters and bombers – not including aircraft of the Soviet Black Sea Fleet – were opposed by just 300 Axis fighters. The outmatched German and Romanian pilots, depleted by prior air combat with American airmen, scored only a few successes and could not contest Soviet air superiority in the critical sectors of the front. Soviet forces quickly annihilated the Romanian 5th Infantry Division and took Podul Iloaiei without much resistance. By 12.30pm, elements of the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army began crossing the Bahlui River – a key part of the Axis defences. Meanwhile, the Soviet Fifty-Second Army drove back the Romanian 7th Infantry Division and by 1.00pm the road to Iași was open. The German 76th Infantry Division, also under intense attack and threatened with encirclement after the collapse of the two ill-fated Romanian divisions, had to retreat.



Soviet troops advance at the beginning of the second Iași–Chișinău offensive in August 1944.  
 (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



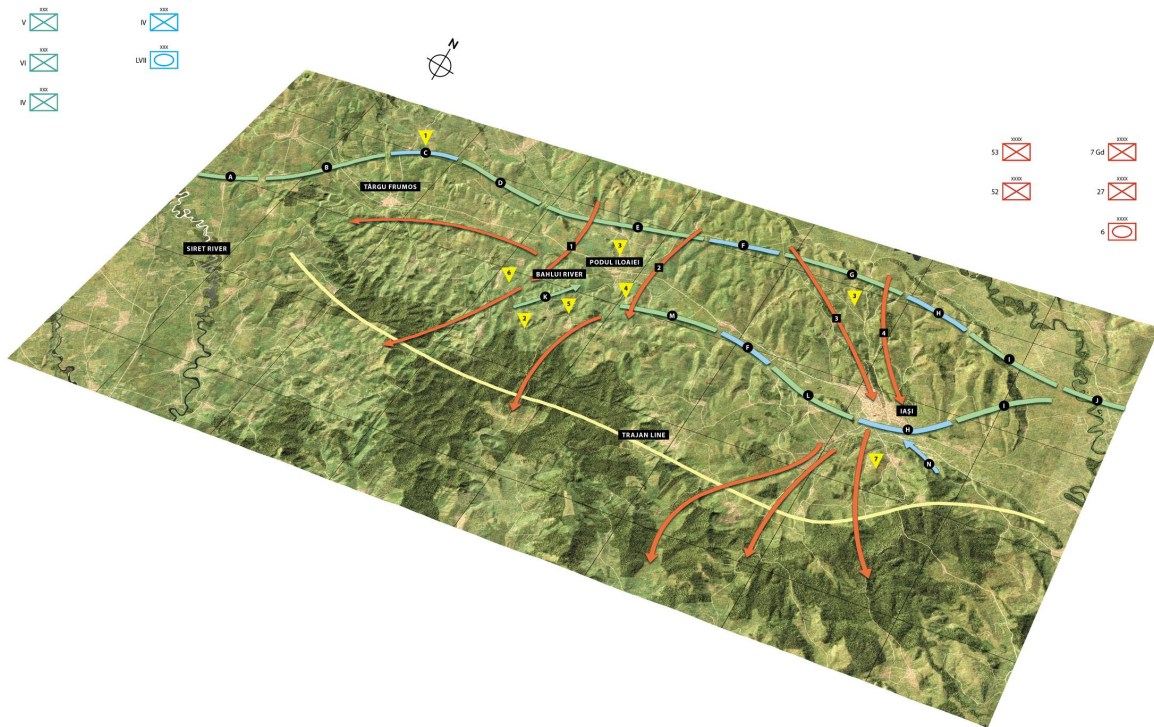
Second Iași–Chișinău offensive, 20–24 August 1944



## SOVIET BREAKTHROUGH ON THE IAȘI FRONT

On 20 August, Soviet artillery begins a massive bombardment on the Iași front paving the way for breakthroughs north of Podul Iloaiei and north-west of Iași against weaker Romanian divisions while avoiding German divisions. The Soviets occupy both the town and the city respectively by the end of the first day. On 21 August, despite desperate Romanian and German counter-attacks to seal the breaches, the Soviets break through portions of the Trajan Line. This was the main line of defence for Axis forces, the loss of which doomed any chances of holding the Iași front.

Note: gridlines are shown at intervals of 10km (6.2miles).



### ALLIES

1. Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army
2. Soviet Sixth Tank Army
3. Soviet XVIII Tank Corps
4. Soviet Fifty-Second Army

### AXIS

#### Romanian V Corps

- A. Romanian Guard Division
- B. Romanian 4th Infantry Division
- C. German 46th Infantry Division

D. Romanian 1st Infantry Division  
**Romanian VI Corps**  
E. Romanian 5th Infantry Division  
F. German 76th Infantry Division  
G. Romanian 7th Infantry Division  
**Romanian IV Corps**  
H. German 79th Infantry Division  
I. Romanian 5th Cavalry Division  
J. Romanian 11th Infantry Division  
**German LVII Panzer Corps**  
K. Romanian 1st Armored Division  
**Other army/army group reserve units**  
L. Romanian 3rd Infantry Division  
M. Romanian 18th Mountain Division  
N. German 10th Panzergrenadier Division

## EVENTS

1. On 19 August, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front initiates a series of local attacks all along the Axis line on the Iași front, probing for weaknesses. Romanian V Corps begins to crack, requiring German LVII Panzer Corps to advance. German–Romanian counter-attacks manage to halt the Soviet forces by evening.
2. On 19/20 August, the Soviets do not let up the pressure during the night, organizing patrols, clearing minefields and conducting night bombing, all to soften up the Axis line for the main Soviet attack. German LVII Panzer Corps moves the Romanian 1st Armoured Division forward to Podul Iloaiei to join in further counter-attacks.
3. On 20 August, at 5.15am, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front begins a massive barrage lasting nearly two hours, after which its infantry and tanks advance under the cover of a powerful air umbrella to break through the weakened Axis line in two locations aiming for Podul Iloaiei and Iași.
4. By 12.30pm, Soviet forces began crossing the Bahlui River, as German and Romanian forces are forced to retreat.
5. Around 2.00pm, the Romanian 1st Armoured Division launches a counter-attack, but it is stopped short of the Bahlui. Soviet forces start to enter Iași a few hours later that afternoon.
6. Around 7.15pm, Soviet tanks and infantry begin to work around the flanks of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division, and push back the Romanian 18th Mountain Division. By nightfall, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front creates a penetration roughly 25km deep and 45km wide on the Iași front. On 21 August, the Romanian 1st Armored Division continues a desperate counter-attack. Soviet forces push forward around it and drive back the 18th Mountain Division, which had also been committed from the reserve by German LVII Panzer Corps, expanding the breakthrough at Podul Iloaiei.
7. German 10th Panzergrenadier Division counter-attacks south-east of Iași on 21 August, but is halted in its tracks by Soviet XVIII Tank Corps allowing further advances.



Soviet forces reach and in places overrun the Trajan Line, which is only thinly held by Romanian infantry and mountain troops, compromising the last line of Axis defence.

Meanwhile, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front had begun bombarding the enemy at about the time Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front launched its attack. The Soviet shelling on the Dniester also lasted nearly two hours targeting German XXX Corps' right flank and German XXIX Corps' left flank. German and Romanian divisions alike suffered heavy casualties – in some cases up to a third of the infantry in a division – before the Soviet Thirty-Seventh Army even attacked from the Chițcani bridgehead. Enemy tanks threatened German 306th Infantry Division's headquarters by 10.00am. To its right, the Romanian 4th Mountain Division quickly broke. Further attacks on either flank by the Soviet Fifty-Seventh Army against German divisions to the north and by the Soviet Forty-Sixth Army against Romanian divisions to the south made steady progress.

General Friessner focused on halting the Soviet breakthrough on the Iași front, however. The Germans believed this was the critical sector, were worried about the Romanians collapsing, and did not yet understand how serious the situation was on the Dniester. German Army Group South Ukraine tried to restore the front with an immediate counter-attack – the classic solution of the German Army to any enemy attack. Friessner committed whatever reserves he had. He threw the Romanian 18th Mountain Division from the south-east into the widening gap at Podul Iloaiei. Additionally, the Romanian 1st Armoured Division was already prepared to counter-attack from the south-west. It was crucial for Axis forces to eliminate the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army's foothold over the Bahlui. Meanwhile, Friessner dispatched the Romanian 3rd Infantry Division, which had been occupying part of the Trajan Line, with some German assault guns to defend Iași. The German 10th Panzergrenadier Division was ordered to support this counter-attack. Holding on to the city was important to maintain the connection of the Romanian Fourth Army with the German Sixth Army on the other side of the Prut. The retreating German 76th Infantry Division would fill the line between these two counter-attacks.

The Soviet assault easily brushed aside both Axis counter-attacks during the afternoon. General Malinovsky, sure of success against the crumbling Romanian Fourth Army, committed the Soviet Sixth Tank Army ahead of schedule after receiving reports that a Soviet bridgehead over the Bahlui had

been seized. The Romanian 18th Mountain Division could not advance north against the tide of enemy armour, but it was able to hold desperately in the wooded hills south of the river. This provided an opportunity for the Romanian 1st Armoured Division to counter-attack at 2.00pm. The Romanian tankers had limited success and one of two battle groups retook the heights at Hoişeşti overlooking the Bahlui. Yet this barely dented the enemy breakthrough at Podul Iloaiei. Meanwhile, north of Iaşi, Soviet forces outflanked the Romanian 5th Cavalry Division, which began retreating after the Romanian 7th Roşiori Regiment became cut off. Consequently, the German 79th and Romanian 11th Infantry Divisions of the German IV Corps had to pull back as well. During the afternoon, soldiers of the Soviet Fifty-Second Army entered Iaşi from the north-west. The forward elements of the Romanian 3rd Infantry Division managed to reach the south-west suburbs to link up with the left flank of the German 79th Infantry Division in the south-east suburbs to form a fragile Axis line on the outskirts of the city.

News of the breakthrough reached Bucharest by lunchtime causing Antonescu to travel to the front to gauge the situation. He and General Şteflea, the chief of the Romanian General Staff, travelled to Romanian Fourth Army headquarters in Bacău, arriving at 6.50pm, where they met General Avramescu and members of his staff to discuss the crisis facing German Army Group Wöhler. General Wöhler attended the meeting as well and several times during the proceedings he called General Friessner to inform the army group commander of the goings on. The council dragged on for four hours. Avramescu and his staff advocated for an immediate withdrawal to the FNB Line. Antonescu and Şteflea were not yet ready for such a drastic action, but they also favoured a withdrawal to the Trajan Line. Wöhler, however, opposed any thought of retreat and argued for counter-attacks all along the collapsing Iaşi front to keep the enemy north of the Bahlui. Antonescu and Şteflea agreed in principle but needed some convincing that it was even possible. Wöhler told Friessner over the telephone that ‘the impression that the Romanian troops make is catastrophic’ and that there was no chance of retaking Iaşi – although he did not admit this to the Romanian generals. Wöhler received permission to shift the German 258th Infantry Division from the German Sixth Army’s reserve to replace the German 10th Panzergrenadier Division, so it in turn could be released for counter-attacks elsewhere. This proved enough to convince Antonescu and Şteflea that German Army Group Wöhler might be able to hold on. A

reluctant Avramescu followed orders to prepare more counter-attacks for the next day.

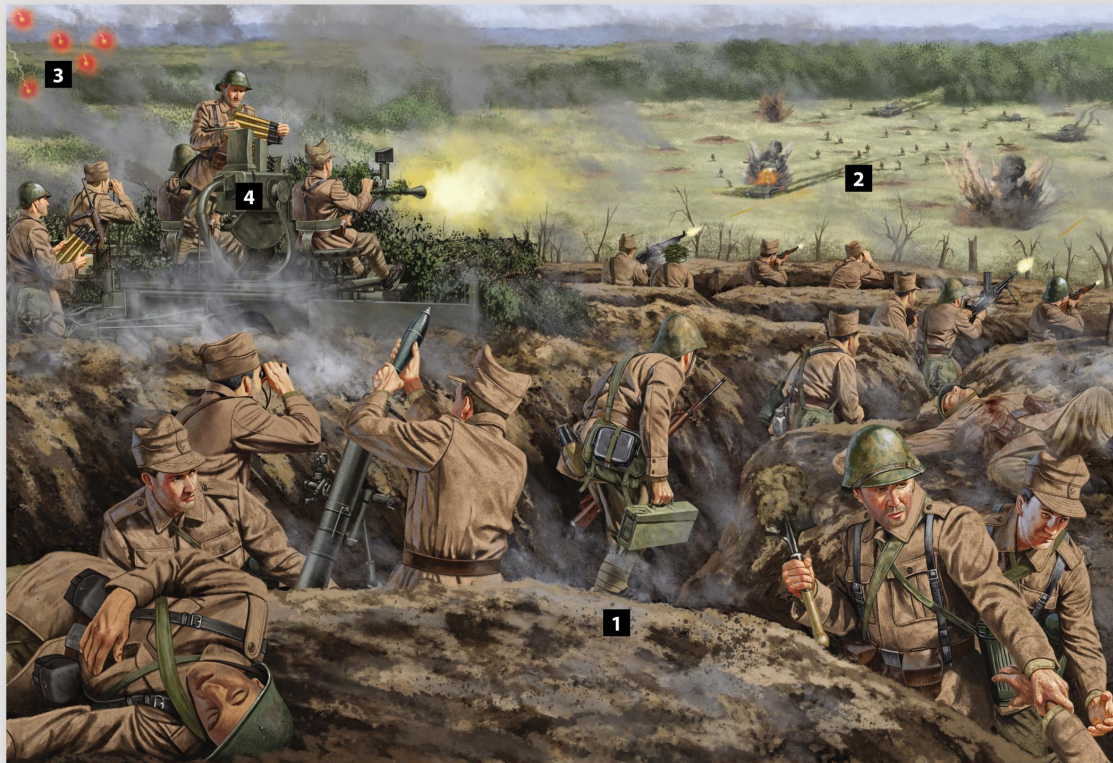
At the same time, the group of conspirators around King Mihai I gathered to discuss their plans to use the crisis at the front to topple the Antonescu regime and exit the Axis. After news of the Soviet offensive had reached him, the monarch travelled to Bucharest on the pretext of inspecting new military aircraft. At a villa in the capital used as a royal residence, the monarch met with seven trusted intimates – members of the royal military household, two generals who had been forcibly retired by Antonescu after he took power, and one other officer. The meeting began with a briefing about the front in Moldavia by General Constantin Sănătescu. He had commanded a corps at Odessa in 1941 before being appointed by Antonescu as the chief of the military household in 1943 with a mission to keep the king informed of military events, but also keep him isolated from political intriguers.

Sănătescu was the wrong choice, however. He was disillusioned with the war and instead put the king in contact with General Gheorghe Mihail, the former chief of the Romanian General Staff, and General Aurel Aldea, the former minister of army endowment, both of whom were in attendance. Sănătescu concluded the Soviet offensive was the real deal and the timing was right for a coup. Mihai I then turned to Colonel Dumitru Dămăceanu. He was perhaps the most important member of the royal conspiracy. Dămăceanu was the chief of staff of the Romanian Capital Military Command that controlled all soldiers and policemen in Bucharest. He could convince his superior to back the monarch and seal the city against any counter-coup attempt by German forces. Dămăceanu told the monarch that it would take him five days to be ready to occupy key points in the city. Mihai I decided, dependent on the agreement of the political leaders of the so-called United Opposition the next night, that the coup would take place six days hence.



General Constantin Sănătescu, key member of the group of plotters around the king.  
(MAPN/Wikimedia Commons/**CC BY-SA 3.0**)

The royal coup plan was as follows. The conducător and the vice prime minister, Mihai Antonescu (no relation), would be invited to meet King Mihai I who would demand an armistice with the Allies. If Antonescu refused, the two would be arrested. The monarch would appoint a new government that would announce the end of hostilities with the USSR, demand German forces to withdraw, and empower Romanian representatives in Cairo to sign an armistice with the British and Americans. Additionally, Mihai I would telegram General Henry Wilson, the supreme Allied commander of the Mediterranean theatre, with a request for Allied bombers to strike German targets around Bucharest and interdict Axis railways in Hungary, Bulgaria and Yugoslavia to prevent the arrival of German reinforcements in Romania. The meeting broke up, but several members worked through the night on map references to attach to the telegram.



### **SOVIET ATTACK ON ROMANIAN POSITIONS OUTSIDE IAȘI, 20 AUGUST 1944**

At 5.15am, on 20 August 1944, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front began a massive bombardment of Axis positions along the Iași front. At the same time, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front also hammered Axis troops huddled in bunkers along the Dniester River line. After the artillery preparation, Soviet armour spearheaded attacks to smash through the enemy defences.

In this scene, cavalymen of the Romanian 5th Cavalry Division have emerged from their protective bunkers and taken up positions in their partially destroyed trenches (1) to meet the assault of a corps of the Soviet Fifty-Second Army north-east of Iași. Soviet troops flood the Jijia river valley in a combined arms attack of tanks, infantry and anti-tank guns below the Romanian positions (2). Having held their fire to allow the enemy to close, a flare with five stars signalled them to open up with all their weapons (3). Romanian troops use rifles, machine guns, mortars, and even Bofors 40mm anti-aircraft guns in a direct fire role (4). The Soviets will be temporarily stymied by the fierce Romanian resistance in this sector but will work around to their left flank where a German unit has retreated exposing the Romanian line.

Soviet forces quickly broke holes through the front held by German Army Group South Ukraine on both the Iași front and the Dniester. By 12.30pm, on the Iași front, Soviet tanks and infantry crossed the Bahlui River and closed in on the city of Iași while retreating German and Romanian troops desperately tried to form a new defensive line.

## AXIS COUNTER-ATTACK

As Antonescu and the generals debated and King Mihai I and the conspirators plotted, the situation on the front worsened. On the Iași front, around 7.15pm, the tanks and infantry of the Soviet Sixth Tank Army began to push back the Romanian 18th Mountain Division and work around the flanks of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division south of the Bahlui. On the Dniester, a counter-attack by the German 13th Panzer Division from the north had been knocked back, so the Soviet advance continued. By nightfall, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front had created a penetration roughly 25km deep and 45km wide on the Iași front. Meanwhile, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front had made more modest gains 12km deep and 35km wide. General Friessner concentrated on the Soviet attack on the Iași front because he believed the Soviet attack on the Dniester was merely a demonstration meant to hold down Axis forces. Yet he still believed German Army Group South Ukraine might hold back the two Soviet fronts or, if not, retreat in order to the FNB Line. In fact, despite the events of the day, Friessner did not request a halt to the transfer of the German 97th Jäger Division that had begun just two days earlier. Perhaps in part because of delayed or inaccurate reports, he remained in denial of the true scope of the unfolding disaster.

German Army Group Wöhler's counter-attack on the Iași front was over almost before it had begun on 21 August. General Radu Korne, the commander of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division, had reorganized the surviving Romanian tanks and German assault guns of his two battle groups into two ad hoc detachments that desperately tried to fight off hundreds of Soviet tanks. The German 20th Panzer Division that was supposed to join the counter-attack never even arrived. Consequently, when the Soviet Sixth Tank Army finally overran the Romanian 18th Mountain Division, it was able to quickly drive on the Trajan Line. General Erich Abraham, the (German) acting commander of Romanian VI Corps, tried to reorganize the exhausted remnants of the Romanian 5th Infantry and 18th Mountain Divisions, reinforced by the Romanian 101st Mountain Command (a brigade-sized formation), to occupy and hold the Trajan Line south of Podul Iloaiei. It was all in vain. Furthermore, newly engaged Soviet XVIII Tank Corps halted the German 10th Panzergrenadier Division's counter-attack and smashed the forward elements of the Romanian 3rd Infantry Division allowing the Soviets to break out south from Iași. Thus, by midday, Soviet forces threatened to



overrun the remains of the Romanian 7th and 3rd Infantry Divisions holding the Trajan Line south of Iași. Clearly, the German plan to hold a forward line on the Bahlui was no longer viable, and even the Romanian plan to retreat to the Trajan Line was now in doubt.



Two signal corps soldiers, one Romanian and one German, demonstrate close operation between the Romanian and German armies in a posed propaganda photo from June 1944. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

Antonescu called for a meeting with General Friessner to reassess the evolving front-line situation. He and General Șteflea had stayed at Romanian Fourth Army headquarters; now they sent members of the conducător's personal military cabinet and the Romanian General Staff with orders to front-line commanders to organize more counter-attacks in a desperate attempt to block the Soviet armies from piercing the Trajan Line. Meanwhile, Antonescu flew to Slănic. During the two-hour conversation, Friessner downplayed the danger, presenting the situation on the Iași front as 'normal'. All that was needed, he argued, was for the Romanian Fourth Army to keep fighting to win time to bring reinforcements from the German Sixth Army, which would enable German Army Group Wöhler to hold the Trajan Line. Friessner patronizingly pointed out that Axis plans could be successful only if Axis troops put up real resistance to the enemy, implying that Romanian soldiers were fleeing rather than fighting. He still thought 'the Russians did not intend a large deployment of forces' aiming only to capture Iași. Friessner emphasized the need to stabilize the situation facing Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu on the Dniester. He brought up the need to plan for an eventual

withdrawal of Axis forces from the Dniester to the Prut if the situation in Bessarabia deteriorated. Antonescu emphasized the political damage that the loss of Iași and Chișinău would inflict on his regime at home. He warned if Romania fell, then all the Balkans would fall. Antonescu did not think a retreat from fortified positions on the Dniester to unfortified positions on the Prut was realistic.

The meeting between the German general and the Romanian dictator was wasted effort. General Friessner remained in denial about the true nature of the Soviet offensive and was not yet ready to ask Hitler for permission to withdraw German Army Group South Ukraine to the FNB Line. Antonescu was caught between political consequences and military realities. Overall, the Romanians evaluated the situation facing the Axis much more accurately than the Germans, but Antonescu still hoped that somehow Friessner was right. Yet news arriving from the front following their meeting proved the days of German military miracles in the face of impossible odds were over for good.

## **AXIS COLLAPSE**

Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu had not experienced heavy fighting on the Dniester during the morning of the 21 August, but now after noon it came under intense assault. The Soviet Forty-Sixth Army smashed the weak line held by the remains of the German 13th Panzer and 306th Infantry Divisions with ease. The Soviets drove south toward the small town of Feștelita splitting open a gap between the German Sixth Army and the Romanian Third Army. There were no additional Axis reserves in the area to even try to seal the breach. Armoured spearheads of the Soviet Forty-Sixth Army drove south-west toward Tarutino with almost no resistance. General Dumitrescu had warned General Ștefleă before the Soviet offensive that the Axis positions on the Dniester would quickly collapse, and his prediction was now proved correct.



A Soviet Sherman tank, a Lend-Lease vehicle built in the United States, speeds through Iași after the fall of the Romanian city. (Pictorial Press Ltd/Alamy Stock Photo)

Meanwhile, any hope of holding the Trajan Line on the Iași front vanished as Romanian VI Corps collapsed. It was the turn of the German 76th Infantry Division to fall apart during its retreat. After tanks opened the way, troops of the Soviet XXXV Guards Rifle Corps reached the Trajan Line. Neither Romanian nor German forces had any chance to repel the enemy to retake the fortifications. Around 3.00pm, Romanian civilian administrators received orders to begin evacuating the population from central Moldavia, although no one told General Friessner of the decision. At the same time, having returned to Bacău, Antonescu convened another meeting with Generals Șteflea, Avramescu and Wöhler about what German Army Group Wöhler should do next. Now all the Romanians united against the German in demanding a withdrawal to the FNB Line. Wöhler opposed Antonescu and his generals for the next four hours. He lamely claimed a German panzer force would be gathered at Bârlad (halfway to the FNB Line) that could stabilize the front around Iași. For some reason, Wöhler did not tell Friessner of this second council.

General Friessner continued to demand counter-attacks by the Romanian Fourth Army in Moldavia in order to save the German Sixth Army in Bessarabia. Romanian VII and I Corps on the Romanian Fourth Army's left flank, which had not been subject to major attacks, succeeded in retreating in good order to the Trajan Line south of Târgu Frumos despite being pressed

by the Soviet Seventh Guards Army. Yet the Romanian Fourth Army's centre continued to collapse. A spearhead of the Soviet Fifty-Second Army overran the Trajan Line south-west of Iași and then surprised the Romanian 3rd Motorized Vânători Regiment assembling at Poiana de Sus. Soviet tanks steadily drove back this element of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division through the rest of the night. Friessner's chief of staff reported to OKH that German Army Group South Ukraine faced grave situations on the Iași front and the Dniester, but rejected a suggestion to pull back to the FNB Line. A few hours later Friessner spoke with General Guderian, the acting chief of OKH. He blamed the Romanians for not fighting and then asked for permission for Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu to evacuate from Bessarabia immediately to take up a new position on the Prut. Friessner believed shortening the front by pulling back from the Dniester would free up enough German troops to hold on to the Iași front.

While General Friessner was consulting OKH in Berlin, Stavka in Moscow was sending out a revised directive to Marshal Timoshenko. The early commitment of the Soviet Sixth Tank Army caused General Malinovsky to fear that its tanks might become tangled up with the Soviet Fifty-Second Army's infantry if both drove south-east toward Huși, a city at a key crossing over the Prut, so he redirected the Soviet Sixth Tank Army to the south while the Soviet Fifty-Second Army continued to the south-east. Stavka was not pleased and ordered the two Soviet fronts to use their armoured spearheads to encircle the German Sixth Army. 'You have all the means for the successful accomplishment of your orders and you must carry out this assignment,' declared the Stavka directive. The Soviets were not about to allow the Germans to evacuate their strongest army in Romania to fight again another day.



Politician Iuliu Maniu who was the leader of the National Peasant Party. (ullstein bild via Getty Images)

Also, that evening, King Mihai I met with the political leaders of the United Opposition. Gheorghe Brătianu represented the Liberal Party, Iuliu Maniu the National Peasant Party, Titel Petrescu the Social Democratic Party, and Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu the Communist Party in Romania. They approved the monarch's plan for the coup and then quickly fell to squabbling about the make-up of the proposed national unity government. An exasperated Mihai I instructed the politicians to present him with a finalized list of ministers within two days. The meeting broke up, but the royal conspirators continued to work. A contact at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs began the tedious work of enciphering the royal telegrams to be sent to the Romanian representatives in Cairo and on to General Wilson in Algiers that lasted all night. This work occurred at Snagov, a small town north of Bucharest, where ministries had relocated most of their offices because of American bombing.

Around midnight, Hitler approved General Friessner's request to begin withdrawing the German Sixth and Romanian Third Armies from Bessarabia.

The OKH message, however, also emphasized that German Army Group South Ukraine was only to pull back to the Prut and had to maintain the Trajan Line. Contrary to what Hitler and Antonescu had agreed to in the case of a major Soviet offensive, no retreat to the FNB Line was authorized. In effect, the German strategy now consisted of sacrificing the Romanian Fourth Army in Moldavia and saving German Sixth Army in Bessarabia. Obviously, this was not in Romania's interest, which led Antonescu to take drastic action once he learned of the decision.

Marshal Timoshenko sent out orders to Generals Malinovsky and Tolbukhin the morning of 22 August for their fronts to focus on linking up on the Prut at Huși. General Malinovsky ordered the Soviet Fourth Guards Army in central Bessarabia to target the German Sixth Army's left flank by driving down the eastern side of the Prut to seize bridges at Ungheni and Coștulenii. On the western side of the Prut, he ordered the Soviet Fifty-Second Army to finish collapsing the Romanian Fourth Army's right flank, the remnants of Romanian IV Corps, while advancing on Vaslui. Malinovsky also unleashed the Soviet Seventh Guards Army on the Romanian Fourth Army's left flank. Its attacks against the mostly intact Romanian VII and I Corps met with little success. Yet in the Romanian Fourth Army's centre, the Romanian VI Corps had virtually ceased to exist while the remnants of the Romanian V Corps could offer little resistance. Spearheads of the Soviet Twenty-Seventh and Sixth Tank Armies penetrated far south of the Trajan Line with near impunity. Meanwhile, General Tolbukhin's Soviet Forty-Sixth Army sliced around the German Sixth Army's right flank into its rear with the Soviet IV and VII Mechanized Corps causing chaos and confusion. The German 13th Panzer Division lost the rest of its tanks and the Romanian 1st Cavalry Division was reduced by a fifth in vain attempts to block the surge of Soviet armour and other vehicles. To prevent the Romanian Third Army from providing aid, the Soviet Danube Flotilla ferried 8,000 naval infantry, plus tanks and artillery, across the mouth of the Dniester estuary to attack Cetatea Albă. A regiment of the Romanian 110th Infantry Brigade was on hand but offered little resistance.

Throughout the morning, German Army Group South Ukraine rushed to try to save the German Sixth Army. The orders to hurry and retreat came as a shock to German Sixth Army in Bessarabia which did not realize how bad the situation on the Iași front or on the lower Dniester was; in part due to broken telecommunication lines. There were only five crossing points over the Prut,



several of which were now under threat of falling into the hands of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front. General Fretter-Pico's German Sixth Army began a mad rush for the Prut bridges while Generals Friessner and Wöhler scrambled to prop up the Romanian Fourth Army's right flank to hold onto the Prut bridges.

Antonescu had other plans, however. At 9.00am, in Bacău, the conducător had decided the situation on the Iași front was hopeless and, with or without German approval, he had to save what he could of the Romanian Fourth Army by starting a phased withdrawal to the FNB Line. Antonescu still held out hope that the Soviet offensive could be halted before breaking through the Focșani Gap. If not, he thought that a national redoubt might be organized in the mountainous terrain of southern Transylvania. At the same time, the conducător also considered abandoning Nazi Germany completely. Vice Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu, in Bucharest, sent out telegrams to Romanian diplomats in Sweden, Turkey and Switzerland to make contact with Allied representatives about an armistice. Either way, the Romanian Army would be crucial in creating a national redoubt or as a bargaining chip in armistice negotiations. Nevertheless, Antonescu decided to meet with General Friessner once more to try to convince the Germans to retreat to the FNB Line, then he would fly back to Bucharest where he would stay only briefly before returning to the front, after which he would go to southern Transylvania to set up a new headquarters from which to co-ordinate a last-ditch defence.

News of Antonescu's new itinerary quickly reached the royal conspiracy. The conducător would not be in Bucharest in four days when the royal coup was scheduled. Without hesitation, King Mihai I moved up the timetable even though preparations to seal off the capital were not finished and no agreement on the government's composition had been reached. Antonescu, along with Mihai Antonescu, would be invited to an audience with the monarch the very next day. The time was now or never for the royal conspiracy.

The Romanian Fourth Army surreptitiously began to prepare to unilaterally withdraw from the Iași front. Half an hour after Antonescu's decision, operational orders had been sent down the chain of command, and by afternoon Romanian staffs began to cut German liaison officers out of the loop of operational decisions. The conducător again flew to Slănic for a meeting at 3.00pm. There he spoke with General Friessner and his staff for over two hours trying to convince the Germans of the merits of an immediate

withdrawal to the FNB Line. Antonescu promised to provide Romanian reserves concentrated around Bucharest to German Army Group South Ukraine. Friessner remained steadfast against the idea. Antonescu did not inform Friessner that what was left of the Romanian Fourth Army was going to pull back the next day. The conducător departed by air to Bucharest disappointed and at a loss to know what he could do to prevent a total Soviet victory, deal with the political fallout at home and find a way to exit the Axis with his honour intact and Romania unoccupied by Nazi Germany.

The fighting that afternoon confirmed the wisdom of the Romanian plan to withdraw. A small success on the Iași front raised great German hopes. On the Romanian Fourth Army's left flank, the remains of Romanian V Corps, led by the German 46th Infantry Division, managed to wrest back control of Târgu Frumos. General Wöhler believed, unrealistically, that this was just the first step in regaining the whole of the Trajan Line. Yet the Romanian Fourth Army's centre continued to crater while its right flank was driven back. The Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army's attack toward Vaslui proved irresistible despite everything German Army Group Wöhler threw at it. The situation, if anything, was worse for Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu on the Dniester. While elements of the German 21st Infantry Division arrived to counter-attack the Soviet landing at Cetatea Albă, the Soviet naval infantry was soon back on the attack. Meanwhile, the Soviet Forty-Sixth Army drove into the rear of the Romanian Third Army threatening to cut off the German 9th Infantry Division (the two Romanian divisions of the German XXIX Corps having been destroyed) and the Romanian III Corps. These Axis forces began to retreat to establish a new defence on the Danube as part of the withdrawal of Romanian Army Group Dumitrescu from Bessarabia. Meanwhile, Soviet armoured spearheads continued west to the Prut.

By nightfall on the 22nd, the situation facing German Army Group South Ukraine was catastrophic. On the Iași front, elements of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front reached as far south as Bârlad. The Romanian Fourth Army could not halt the enemy. Axis forces on both sides of the Prut had retreated and Soviet forces took the vital river crossing at Ungheni. On the Dniester, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front finally took Cetatea Albă. The German Sixth Army was isolated from the Romanian Third Army and contracted into a perimeter that still included Chișinău. Thus, when the German liaison at Romanian Fourth Army headquarters told General Wöhler that General Avramescu had received 'orders directly from the Marshal to retreat to southern Moldavia',

the news was met with stunned disbelief. A withdrawal to the FNB Line would mean the loss of the remaining crossings over the Prut and the destruction of the German Sixth Army.

General Wöhler immediately telephoned General Avramescu to demand that the order for the Romanian Army to withdraw be countermanded. The chief of staff of the Romanian Fourth Army sent a message to the Romanian General Staff asking which order should be followed: that of Antonescu or that of Wöhler. Avramescu, who had been advocating a withdrawal to the FNB Line since the beginning of the Soviet offensive, was fed up with repeated delays and feared the vacillating conducător might once more be swayed by the Germans, so at 8.45pm he resigned in protest even before hearing back from Bucharest. He would not pass on the German orders to his Romanian subordinates who continued to break with the enemy and retreat during the night.



German and Romanian troops retreat from the Iași front using every available means of conveyance: truck, wagon, bicycle and feet. (Bundesarchiv, Bild 1011-244-2311-03)

After arriving in Bucharest, Antonescu's evening was filled with meetings as he tried to grope his way forward as his world came crumbling down around him. He first had a one-on-one meeting with Ion Mihalache from the National Peasant Party and then with Gheorghe Brătianu from the Liberal Party. The two men had asked to meet with the conducător at the request of the king. Mihai I wanted the politicians to pressure Antonescu to not return to the front without first briefing the monarch about the situation there. Both men also urged the conducător that it was time for an armistice, a suggestion

to which Antonescu seemed open. He then met with Carl Clodius, the German ambassador to Romania, for economic discussions. Antonescu demanded immediate German assistance or Romania would have to make peace. This attempt at diplomatic blackmail probably fell flat because the conducător had made the same threat many times before. He also threatened to agree to an armistice with the Allies, but only after he threw Romania's last reserves of manpower and materiel into the battle. Again, the Germans knew that Antonescu had tied his fate to that of Nazi Germany and was unlikely to actually follow through on this threat. The German ambassador wrote a summary of the meeting, which he transmitted by non-priority telegram that did not reach Berlin for over a day. Yet it is unlikely to have made much difference even if it had arrived sooner. Although Antonescu toyed with reopening dialogue with the Allies through his diplomats or political opposition, his instinct seemed to be to fight it out to the bitter end because he knew his personal safety depended on holding on to power.

As the day dawned on 23 August, German Army Group South Ukraine imploded as a retreat turned into a rout. General Șteflea returned to Bacău to take command of the Romanian Fourth Army to co-ordinate its withdrawal to the FNB Line. German and Romanian units caught in the wake of the torrent of Soviet forces flooding down Moldavia tried to avoid enemy patrols and escape westwards over the Siret before being captured. Others headed south to try to reach the FNB Line before the arrival of the Soviets. While Șteflea tried to organize a fighting retreat of Romanian units, General Friessner continued to mount whatever counter-attacks he could with whatever German units were on hand. The German instructors in Tecuci helping to organize the Romanian 2nd Armoured Division received orders to seize the panzers and assault guns from the Romanian trainees and head north to counter-attack at Bârlad and Vaslui to hold open a route of retreat for the German Sixth Army. Yet this was a fool's errand. In Bessarabia, during the night, spearheads of the Soviet Thirty-Seventh Army had turned north-west into the rear of the German Sixth Army and by morning blocked most of the roads to the Prut bridges already choked with huge traffic jams of German vehicles. The German 257th Infantry Division became smashed into 'four-five compact columns, which hopelessly blocked the roads'. The spreading chaos was exacerbated by the fact that, under orders from Friessner, German Sixth Army headquarters had relocated from Bessarabia to Moldavia and all telecommunications were lost. Furthermore, the Soviet Forty-Sixth Army

turned south-west pressing the Romanian Third Army against the coast, preventing it from retreating. The road to the Danube bridges was open to the Soviets.

## **ROMANIAN ROYAL COUP**

Meanwhile, King Mihai I made final preparations for the coup. After further pressure from his wife and his vice prime minister, who also thought the conducător should accept the need for an armistice, Antonescu had scheduled an audience with the monarch for the afternoon of 23 August, before holding a meeting with the council of ministers in which he would give a speech about the need to keep on fighting. During lunch, Mihai I and his close advisers decided to arrest not only the marshal and the vice prime minister, but also the rest of the government. Colonel Dămăceanu still had to be informed to be ready to act at once rather than in three days' time. Finally, the conspirators wanted the political leaders to be in the audience to make the coup look like a popular uprising rather than a palace intrigue. Yet no politicians could be located who would commit to coming. Mihai I moved forward with just his military household intimates.

By 3.00pm, when the audience between king and conducător was scheduled, the heat was sweltering. Vice Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu arrived punctually at the royal residence Casa Nouă (the New House). Antonescu was late, as usual, but soon both were waiting with General Sănătescu in the drawing room for King Mihai I while two officers loyal to the monarch took up positions just down the stairs with another three non-commissioned officers in a nearby corridor. The king asked the conducător for a report on the fighting at the front. Antonescu admitted the Soviets had broken through in Moldavia and Bessarabia, but he blamed the army for not fighting hard enough and the political opposition for weakening the army's morale through propaganda. Mihai I asked, 'Don't you think the moment has come to conclude an armistice either by you or by another government?' Antonescu responded he had reached out to the Allies but he was not ready to agree to an armistice without warning Hitler first and obtaining certain guarantees from the Allies. He wanted time for German troops to withdraw without harassment, Romanian civil administration to continue, an inviolable district reserved as the headquarters of the Romanian government, and no border changes until a post-war peace conference. Mihai I and Sănătescu

argued there was no time to try to wrangle such concessions out of the Allies. Vice Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu asked for a couple of days to hear back from Allied representatives in Turkey, but Sănătescu said he believed Romania had only a couple of hours to decide. Mihai I asked Antonescu to step aside for someone who was ready to sign an armistice. The conducător vehemently refused. Instead, Antonescu declared he would hold the Focșani Gap by throwing whatever additional Romanian troops could be found into the fray and, if that failed, Axis forces would retreat into the mountains and hold back the enemy there. 'If that's how things are, then there's nothing more for us to do,' said Mihai I. This statement included a code phrase that caused the captain outside to enter, with three other soldiers who saluted the conducător, and then asked him to come with them, grabbing his arm. Antonescu went rigid and demanded, 'What does this mean?' For a moment, everyone hesitated, but then the king's adjutant watching from the doorway yelled to the soldiers, 'Carry out your orders!' The group took the conducător, who threatened them with execution for treachery, and the vice prime minister upstairs where both were locked in a large wall safe where King Carol II used to keep his stamp collection.

After this the conspirators moved to decapitate the rest of the Antonescu regime. First, Antonescu's escort waiting with his vehicle outside were invited in on the pretext of getting out of the heat and then arrested, all less than a hundred yards from the Gestapo (German secret police) headquarters in the capital. Mihai I next moved across the street to the Royal Palace. Then invitations went out in Antonescu's name requesting meetings with the minister of the interior, minister of defence, prefect of Bucharest, chief of the Gendarmerie and head of Siguranța (the secret police). The ministers and prefect arrived and were arrested. The head of the Gendarmerie agreed to come but failed to show up. Eugen Cristescu, who knew from his Siguranța informants that Antonescu's motorcade had been parked in the palace garage, smelled a rat when he received a phone call. He demanded to speak to the conducător. When Antonescu failed to come to the phone, Cristescu went to alert the German Legation. Baron Manfred von Killinger, the German ambassador to Romania, was not in the city. Nevertheless, at 5.00pm, the German counsellor who was on hand gathered the respective heads of the German Army, Luftwaffe and Kriegsmarine missions who decided to call for von Killinger to return to the capital and inform Berlin of the royal coup.



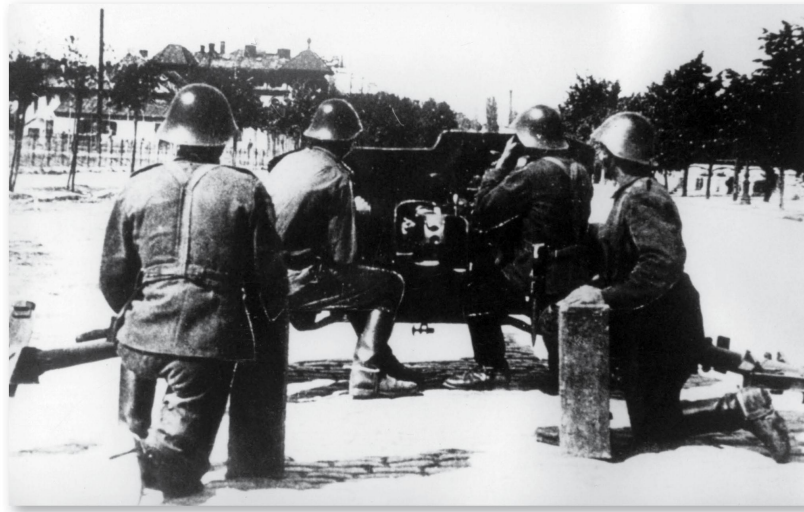


Brătianu Boulevard in Bucharest two days after the royal coup. (SuperStock/Alamy Stock Photo)

As the royal coup unfolded in Bucharest, German Army Group South Ukraine continued to fall apart. Increasingly, panic gripped German and Romanian soldiers who were desperate to escape capture. In Moldavia, the Romanian 2nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Regiment found the road to a bridge over the Siret crowded with units of all arms, groups of soldiers isolated from units, transport vehicles, carts overladen with wounded, artillery pieces and mounted troops galloping forward. ‘Panic could be read on the faces and in everyone’s gestures, the fear that they would not reach the bridge in time, amplified by the rumour that the Russians had reached the locality of Tecuci,’ a second lieutenant from the unit later recalled. Despite determined resistance from the remains of three German and four Romanian divisions, forward elements of Soviet XVIII Tank Corps began to push into Huși. The Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front was close to cutting off any retreat for the German Sixth Army west over the Prut. Around the same time, tanks of Soviet VII and IV Mechanized Corps seized the crossing over the Prut near Leova, south of Huși. Thus, Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front blocked the German Sixth Army from retreating south toward the Danube. The German Sixth Army became a desperate horde trying to find a way to escape.

Back in Bucharest, the royal coup gathered momentum. Since the political leaders of the United Opposition had not presented King Mihai I with what the composition of the new government should be, and none of them were

around, General Sănătescu, who would be the new prime minister, had chosen generals to be his ministers. The monarch insisted the four leaders of the United Opposition – now to be known as the National Democratic Bloc – be appointed ministers without portfolio even without their agreement. The Royal Palace was abuzz with activity and locked down under guard by trustworthy soldiers.



A Romanian gun crew on a street in Bucharest during the fighting in the capital after the royal coup. (INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo)

Around 7.00pm, Baron von Killinger finally arrived back at the German Legation and went at once to see King Mihai I. The Romanian monarch told the German ambassador the Antonescu regime had been deposed and General Sănătescu's new government intended to cease hostilities against the Red Army and sign an armistice with the Allies. Mihai I concluded by asking von Killinger to convince the German government to immediately withdraw all German forces from his country. Soon after, Romania officially broke diplomatic relations with Nazi Germany. Yet the new Romanian minister of foreign affairs told the German counsellor that the Romanians would grant German troops free passage so long as there were no hostilities. General Alfred Gerstenberg, the chief of the German Luftwaffe Mission in Romania, informed OKW of the recent events, and without consulting von Killinger, General Friessner or anyone else, he instead suggested launching a counter-coup using German troops in and around Bucharest and Ploești. Hitler, unsurprisingly, enthusiastically agreed and ordered Mihai I to be arrested.

Thus, the Germans threw away the chance of evacuating a substantial number of German rear-echelon forces from Romania before the arrival of the Soviets.

News of the royal coup became public at 10.25pm when a speech by King Mihai I was broadcast on the radio. 'Romanians, in this most difficult hour of our history I have decided, in full understanding with my people, that there is only one way to save the country from total catastrophe; our withdrawal from the alliance with the Axis powers and the immediate cessation of the war with the United Nations,' he said. He announced the establishment of a national unity government, the decision to accept an armistice, and the end of all hostile acts against Soviet forces, as well as against US and British forces. Mihai I repeatedly mentioned the Soviet Union, Great Britain and the United States together to soften the blow of making peace with the Soviets whom the Romanians still feared greatly. The BBC monitoring service picked up the speech and made Romania's defection from the Axis worldwide news half an hour later. Yet the communication centre of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs at Snagov was possibly under German control, so it was unclear if the telegram from the king to General Wilson requesting Allied air support had been delivered. For the moment, the new royal regime was on its own.

The royal proclamation on the radio did not stop the fighting and the dying on the front. Moscow had no inkling of the royal coup, so the Soviet commanders were not expecting this turn of events and continued to treat Romanian units as hostile. Many Romanian soldiers did not hear the news because they were not near a radio or too busy fighting or retreating. King Mihai I had not trusted the officer corps, so all of the Romanian commanders were taken by surprise as well. At 10.45pm, Baron von Killinger telephoned German Army Group South Ukraine headquarters to inform General Friessner that Antonescu had been arrested and Romania had abandoned the Axis. The stunned German army group commander spoke with Generals Șteflea and Dumitrescu appealing to their honour to keep fighting alongside the German Army. Yet both declined. 'I cannot take another attitude than that which HM the King and the new government took,' said Dumitrescu. The king was still technically the head of the Romanian Army to whom the generals owed their allegiance. Moreover, the Romanian commanders were staring defeat in the face and saw no other way out. Șteflea and Dumitrescu, so reconciled, tried to save what they could of the Romanian Fourth and Third Armies, respectively, to aid the new Romanian government.

## GERMAN ATTEMPTED COUNTER-COUP

General Gerstenberg rushed to prepare his forces, firm in a misplaced belief of success. There were approximately 35,000 German personnel spread around Bucharest and Ploești, but most of them could not be used for the counter-coup due to lack of proper training, being too old or being employed elsewhere. Overnight, Gerstenberg assembled a group of less than 3,000 men at the German night fighter airfield at Otopeni on the northern outskirts of Bucharest. General Hansen, the chief of the German Army Mission in Romania, warned Hitler he was underestimating the strength, training and ability of the Romanian reserves in the city, but no one listened. On 24 August, at 3.00am, King Mihai I and his entourage departed Bucharest to ensure that he would not be captured. The Sănătescu government had cut communications of German offices and started to disarm German personnel in the city. The Romanian Capital Military Command had 7,000 Romanian soldiers, with tank support, on hand with more already on the way. At 8.30am, Gerstenberg started his motorized column of ragtag infantry with some anti-aircraft guns down the road. The German force took the Romanian fighter airfield at Băneasa but was then stopped at a bridge by an ad hoc Romanian group composed of cavalry and light tanks, so at 10.35am, Gerstenberg ordered air attacks on the city.



Romanian troops march in Bucharest after defeating the German counter-coup attempt.  
(INTERFOTO/Alamy Stock Photo)

News about the royal coup in Bucharest finally reached Allied commanders. Marshal Timoshenko passed on new Stavka orders to Generals Malinovsky and Tolbukhin to continue the offensive as planned. Stavka suggested that Romanian units that surrendered voluntarily should not be disarmed and imprisoned but allowed to keep their weapons to fight ‘a common struggle’ against the Axis. It took time for these orders to filter down the line, however, so most Romanian troops continued to be treated like prisoners of war. US Strategic Air Forces in Europe issued a terse order to Mediterranean Allied Air Forces: ‘Suspend attacks on all Romanian targets.’

Meanwhile, Nazi Germany stepped up its attacks on Romanian targets in Bucharest. The relatively weak German air attacks were rather ineffectual and failed to spread panic among the civilian population who were accustomed to much worse. Romanian anti-aircraft defences were robust because of the previous American bombing raids. The German Brandenburg Division, a special forces unit, used transport aircraft to land two platoons of special forces at two Romanian airfields to immobilize aircraft of the Romanian I Air Corps, but Romanian paratroopers and air force security troops quickly killed or captured the two teams. A German SS parachute battalion under Otto Skorzeny, the SS officer who had rescued Italian dictator Benito Mussolini after Italy had defected a year earlier, was on standby in German-occupied Serbia to try to rescue Antonescu. King Mihai I had turned Antonescu over to the Romanian communists, however, who kept the deposed dictator in a secret location. Consequently, no German rescue effort could be attempted. The Niculescu Detachment arrived from the Mechanized Training Centre at Târgoviște and pushed back German troops at Mogoșoaia trying to find a western route into Bucharest. With General Gerstenberg stalled outside the capital, the Romanian 2nd Călărași Regiment, which also had French World War I-era tanks attached, assaulted the headquarters of the German Army and Luftwaffe downtown. The German counter-coup was not going well.





A review of Romanian I Air Corps in the summer of 1944. After 23 August 1944 some of these Romanian airmen would foil German commandos attempting to sabotage Romanian aircraft. (Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images)

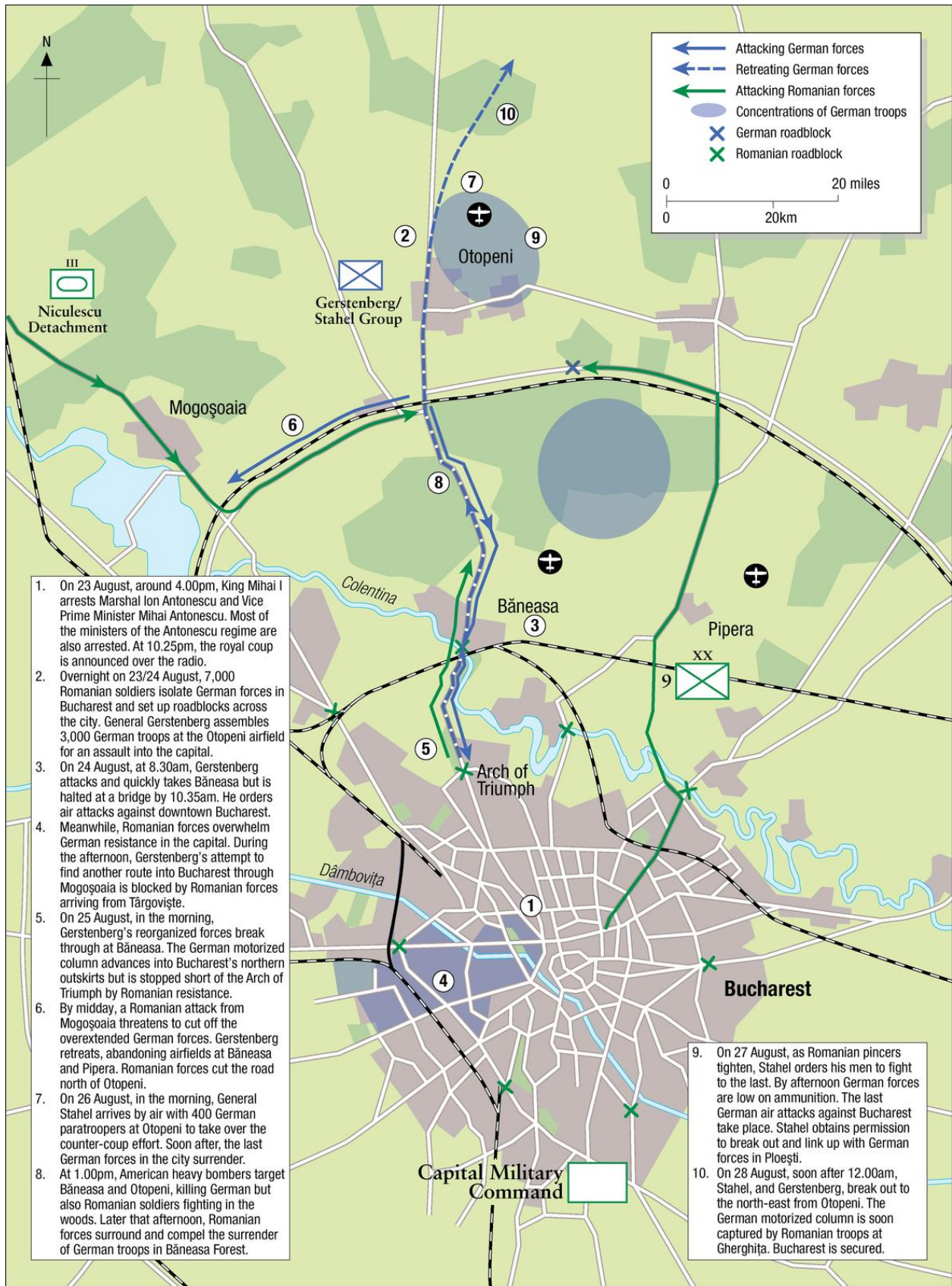


Disarmed Romanian mountain troops cheer the arrival of Soviet assault guns in Bacău in a staged propaganda photograph. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

While hostilities had broken out in Bucharest, the German–Romanian military divorce was more cordial on the front. As news of the royal coup reached Romanian units and individual soldiers, they were confronted with



three choices: continued resistance, surrender or withdrawal. In most cases, Romanian troops decided to retreat, often on roads also occupied by German soldiers. In one case, after breaking out of a Soviet encirclement on the Iași front, a Romanian battalion learned from a German battalion of the events in Bucharest. ‘We remained stupefied ... I could not understand why my superior commanders abandoned us,’ remembered a Romanian second lieutenant. His unit decided to go its own way but was quickly captured. A combination of confusion about the unexpected political developments, loyalty to former allies and desire to escape the Soviets convinced most Germans and Romanians on the front to avoid fighting each other for as long as possible.



1. On 23 August, around 4.00pm, King Mihai I arrests Marshal Ion Antonescu and Vice Prime Minister Mihai Antonescu. Most of the ministers of the Antonescu regime are also arrested. At 10.25pm, the royal coup is announced over the radio.
2. Overnight on 23/24 August, 7,000 Romanian soldiers isolate German forces in Bucharest and set up roadblocks across the city. General Gerstenberg assembles 3,000 German troops at the Otopeni airfield for an assault into the capital.
3. On 24 August, at 8.30am, Gerstenberg attacks and quickly takes Băneasa but is halted at a bridge by 10.35am. He orders air attacks against downtown Bucharest. Meanwhile, Romanian forces overwhelm German resistance in the capital. During the afternoon, Gerstenberg's attempt to find another route into Bucharest through Mogoșoaia is blocked by Romanian forces arriving from Târgoviște.
4. On 25 August, in the morning, Gerstenberg's reorganized forces break through at Băneasa. The German motorized column advances into Bucharest's northern outskirts but is stopped short of the Arch of Triumph by Romanian resistance.
5. By midday, a Romanian attack from Mogoșoaia threatens to cut off the overextended German forces. Gerstenberg retreats, abandoning airfields at Băneasa and Pipera. Romanian forces cut the road north of Otopeni.
6. On 26 August, in the morning, General Stahel arrives by air with 400 German paratroopers at Otopeni to take over the counter-coup effort. Soon after, the last German forces in the city surrender.
7. At 1.00pm, American heavy bombers target Băneasa and Otopeni, killing German but also Romanian soldiers fighting in the woods. Later that afternoon, Romanian forces surround and compel the surrender of German troops in Băneasa Forest.

8. On 27 August, as Romanian pincers tighten, Stahel orders his men to fight to the last. By afternoon German forces are low on ammunition. The last German air attacks against Bucharest take place. Stahel obtains permission to break out and link up with German forces in Ploești.
9. On 28 August, soon after 12.00am, Stahel, and Gerstenberg, break out to the north-east from Otopeni. The German motorized column is soon captured by Romanian troops at Gherghița. Bucharest is secured.

## The securing of Bucharest after 23 August 1944

By noon on 24 August, Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front had linked up with Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front at Leova on the Prut. General Malinovsky's armoured spearheads in Moldavia continued south to Bacău, Bârlad and Tecuci as well – German Army Group South Ukraine desperately tried to occupy the FNB Line to block the Focșani Gap with German divisions. The Romanian Fourth Army continued to try to escape. General Tolbukhin's armies had occupied Chișinău in the morning and relentlessly pounded the encircled German Sixth Army. The Romanian Third Army tried to break through to the Danube bridges, but later in the day a force of Soviet naval infantry landed at Jibrieni. This cut off Romanian III Corps, which also included the orphaned German 9th Infantry Division, forcing its surrender near Sărata.

On 25 August, Romania officially declared war on Nazi Germany. Romanian II Corps, which had been guarding the coast from the Danube to the Bulgarian border against a Soviet landing, received orders to neutralize German units in the area and send reinforcements to Bucharest. The commander of the Romanian 9th Infantry Division demanded the commander of German naval forces leave the port of Constanța. The commander of Romanian naval forces ordered his warships not to fire unless fired upon. The German vessels meekly steamed out to sea turning south toward Bulgarian waters. Romanian II Corps continued disarming German troops stationed in the Dobruja region on the Black Sea coast – eventually over 10,500.

That morning General Gerstenberg launched another attempt to penetrate into Bucharest. This time the German force was able to break through, cross the Băneasa bridge and advance down a main thoroughfare toward downtown, but fierce Romanian resistance halted it just north of the Arch of Triumph – a memorial to Romania's victory over the Central Powers in World War I. At noon, the tankers of the Niculescu Detachment began a counter-attack from the west that quickly threatened to cut off the overextended German column. The Germans had to retreat ceding the Băneasa and Pipera airfields. Yet the Romanians had cut the road north of Otopeni to Ploești already. Additionally, troops of the Romanian 9th Infantry Division started arriving from Constanța to the east of the German force. Therefore, Gerstenberg and his men were isolated at Otopeni with only the airfield for reinforcement and resupply. German aircraft from airfields around

Ploești continued to target downtown Bucharest inflicting damage on a part of the city that had largely been spared by American heavy bombers aiming for the railyards.

During the day, on the front, Soviet corps commanders made the first local arrangements with Romanian unit commanders against the German Eighth Army. The Soviets had not attacked the Axis line running north to south along the Carpathian foothills in any strength before this, but Romania's defection now offered a chance for the Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front to seize critical passes through the mountains into the Transylvanian Plateau beyond. The Romanian 3rd and 6th Grăniceri (Border Guard) Regiments, holding part of the German Eighth Army's centre, agreed to open the way to Câmpulung and guide the Soviet L Corps to the Mestecăniș Pass. A portion of the Romanian 1st Armoured Division agreed to help Soviet XXIV Corps reach the Ghimeș Pass farther south. Additionally, the Romanian Fourth Army combined mountain, infantry, grăniceri and artillery units into the Romanian 103rd Mountain Division, and sent it to eliminate a pocket of German resistance at Onești. General Wöhler organized a hasty but comparatively successful retreat by the German Eighth Army into the Carpathian Mountains over the next few days.





### **ROMANIAN AMBUSH OF A GERMAN MOTORIZED COLUMN ON THE OUTSKIRTS OF BUCHAREST, 25 AUGUST 1944**

On 23 August 1944, King Mihai I carried out a royal coup that decapitated the Antonescu regime and removed Romania from the Axis. General Alfred Gerstenberg, the chief of the German Luftwaffe Mission to Romania, gathered a hotchpotch force of 3,000 German Luftwaffe troops, most with limited to no training in infantry combat, at Otopeni north of Bucharest to attempt a counter-coup. On 24 August, he launched attacks to try to break through the cordon of Romanian troops thrown around the city by the 7,000-man-strong Romanian Capital Military Command. Gerstenberg made limited progress, being halted along the most direct route at Băneasa and blocked along an alternate route by Romanian reinforcements arriving from the west at Mogoșoaia.

On 25 August, after reorganizing, Gerstenberg made another attempt to drive into downtown Bucharest to link up with German forces in the city, breaking through and crossing the bridge at Băneasa. The lightly armed, ad hoc German motorized column advanced down the wide, tree-lined Kiseleff Highway (1). Hidden Romanian infantry and anti-tank crews knock out the lead German vehicle, a Sd.Kfz. 222 armoured car (2), and forced the rest of the motorized column to halt just short of the Arch of Triumph (3) commemorating Romania's victory in World War I. The poorly equipped and badly trained German Luftwaffe troops (4) got no farther and soon had to pull back because of the threat of being cut off by Romanian tanks from Mogoșoaia.



A column of Soviet tanks, flanked by files of Romanian infantry, advance up a road to fight German and Hungarian troops holding northern Transylvania. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

In addition to guiding the Soviets to the passes in Moldavia, the Romanians secured the Predeal Pass in Wallachia. The Romanian 1st Mountain Division had been refitting in the area when news of the royal coup arrived and it advanced north into southern Transylvania to secure Braşov, where the Romanian aircraft industry was concentrated, taking more than 4,600 German troops captive. The Romanian 13th Training Division then occupied the Predeal Pass, cutting off the most direct route of reinforcement from or retreat to northern Transylvania, which was part of Hungary, for the German forces in and around Bucharest and Ploeşti.

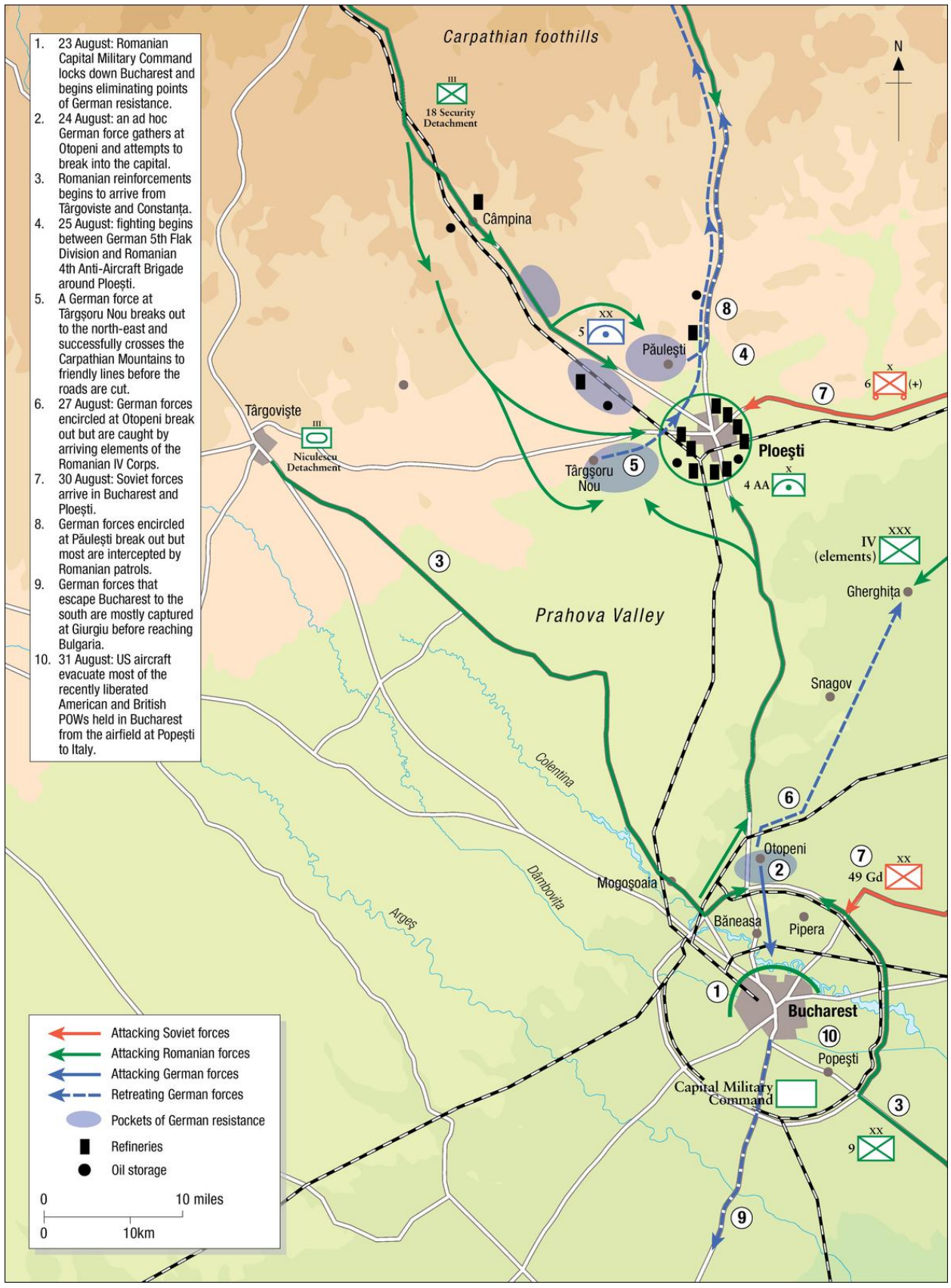
After a brief stand-off, fighting began in Ploeşti. The opposing forces were somewhat more evenly matched here with 26,000 Germans versus 23,000 Romanians. Yet the German 5th Flak Division, commanded by General Julius Kuderna, and its security troops were dispersed around the city in an outer ring while the Romanian 4th Anti-Aircraft Brigade held an inner ring. Moreover, farther out from the German air defences, the Romanian 18th Security Detachment, six reserve infantry battalions, formed an arc to the north and west and the Romanian 5th Training Division was based to the east of Ploeşti. Again, most of the German Luftwaffe troops were not prepared to fight as infantry, and anti-aircraft guns in fixed positions were unsuited to mobile operations. Kuderna had concentrated whatever men he could in north-west Ploeşti before the shooting started – in some places German and Romanian anti-aircraft batteries traded fire – as Romanian troops drove the German force out of the city to the town of Păuleşti. Another group of 2,300



German troops who had concentrated at the Târgșoru Nou airfield obtained permission from German Luftflotte 4, without informing Kuderna, to break out of a Romanian encirclement. It managed to drive north-east and meet up with German forces escaping into the Carpathians.

Even though German Army Group South Ukraine had fallen apart almost completely, Hitler remained determined to take Bucharest. On 26 August, in the morning, General Reiner Stahel arrived by air with 400 parachutists of the German Brandenburg Division at Otopeni. The German Luftwaffe general had been plucked from Warsaw where his contribution to suppressing an uprising of the Polish resistance in the city was ordering civilians executed, taken as hostages or used as human shields in bloody street fighting. Stahel probably planned to use similar brutal methods in Bucharest, but he never had the chance. Soon after his arrival, the last German troops in the city capitulated. Moreover, Stahel discovered his force of rear-echelon misfits was barely holding on against Romanian counter-attacks in the forest between Băneasa and Otopeni. King Mihai I's telegram to General Wilson must have got through because, at 1.00pm, American heavy bombers targeted the airfields at Băneasa and Otopeni as requested. The Americans did much damage to the Germans but also inflicted casualties on the Romanians. US Fifteenth Air Force lacked intelligence about the situation on the ground, so General Twining did not mount further air raids against German targets.

1. 23 August: Romanian Capital Military Command locks down Bucharest and begins eliminating points of German resistance.
2. 24 August: an ad hoc German force gathers at Otopeni and attempts to break into the capital.
3. Romanian reinforcements begins to arrive from Târgoviște and Constanța.
4. 25 August: fighting begins between German 5th Flak Division and Romanian 4th Anti-Aircraft Brigade around Ploești.
5. A German force at Târgșoru Nou breaks out to the north-east and successfully crosses the Carpathian Mountains to friendly lines before the roads are cut.
6. 27 August: German forces encircled at Otopeni break out but are caught by arriving elements of the Romanian IV Corps.
7. 30 August: Soviet forces arrive in Bucharest and Ploești.
8. German forces encircled at Păulești break out but most are intercepted by Romanian patrols.
9. German forces that escape Bucharest to the south are mostly captured at Giurgiu before reaching Bulgaria.
10. 31 August: US aircraft evacuate most of the recently liberated American and British POWs held in Bucharest from the airfield at Popești to Italy.



	Attacking Soviet forces
	Attacking Romanian forces
	Attacking German forces
	Retreating German forces
	Pockets of German resistance
	Refineries
	Oil storage

0 10 miles  
0 10km

## Fighting around Bucharest and Ploești, 24–31 August 1944

German Army Group South Ukraine received news from reconnaissance aircraft on the German Sixth Army. The remains of German XXX, LII and XXXXIV Corps were still fighting in a 20km-wide pocket east of the Prut. Only a few units had managed to make it across at the Huși river crossing to join German IV Corps, which was encircled on the western side of the Prut. After a failed attempt to retake Huși the day before, German IV Corps attacked southward in an attempt to break out. Pockets of desperate German resistance in Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front's rear caused some concern at General Malinovsky's headquarters but did not much slow the Soviet advance to the Focșani Gap aiming for Ploești and Bucharest.

That afternoon, the Romanian Capital Military Command surrounded the German force in the Băneasa Forest, which surrendered soon afterward. Generals Stahel and Gerstenberg still held on at Otopeni. Romanian anti-aircraft artillery shot down many German transport aircraft – including several massive Me-232 Gigants ('Giants') – bringing men and materiel to Otopeni from Yugoslavia. The situation facing General Kuderna's forces around Ploești also deteriorated as a Romanian armoured detachment – a hotchpotch of French and Czech tanks – arrived to assist in eliminating German resistance. Farther south, Romanian II Territorial Corps finished disarming German anti-aircraft units in Giurgiu, a port on the Danube. Romanian control of this city blocked escape to and reinforcement from Bulgaria eventually capturing over 9,000 German troops coming from Bucharest or downriver.

Soviet columns flooded through the Focșani Gap as German resistance around Bucharest and Ploești neared the end. On 27 August, General Stahel ordered his men to fight to the last as Romanian troops began to encircle Otopeni. General Gerstenberg co-ordinated the last German air raids on Bucharest. By afternoon, with losses mounting and ammunition running out, Stahel asked permission from OKH to break out.

As General Stahel kept his men fighting outside Bucharest, Aviator Captain Constantin M. Cantacuzino undertook a daring mission to contact the US Fifteenth Air Force. Lieutenant Colonel James A. Gun III, the senior Allied prisoner of war in Romania until the royal coup, had been working to organize the evacuation of American and British airmen who had been shot down in previous months. He discovered he would have to guide a Romanian

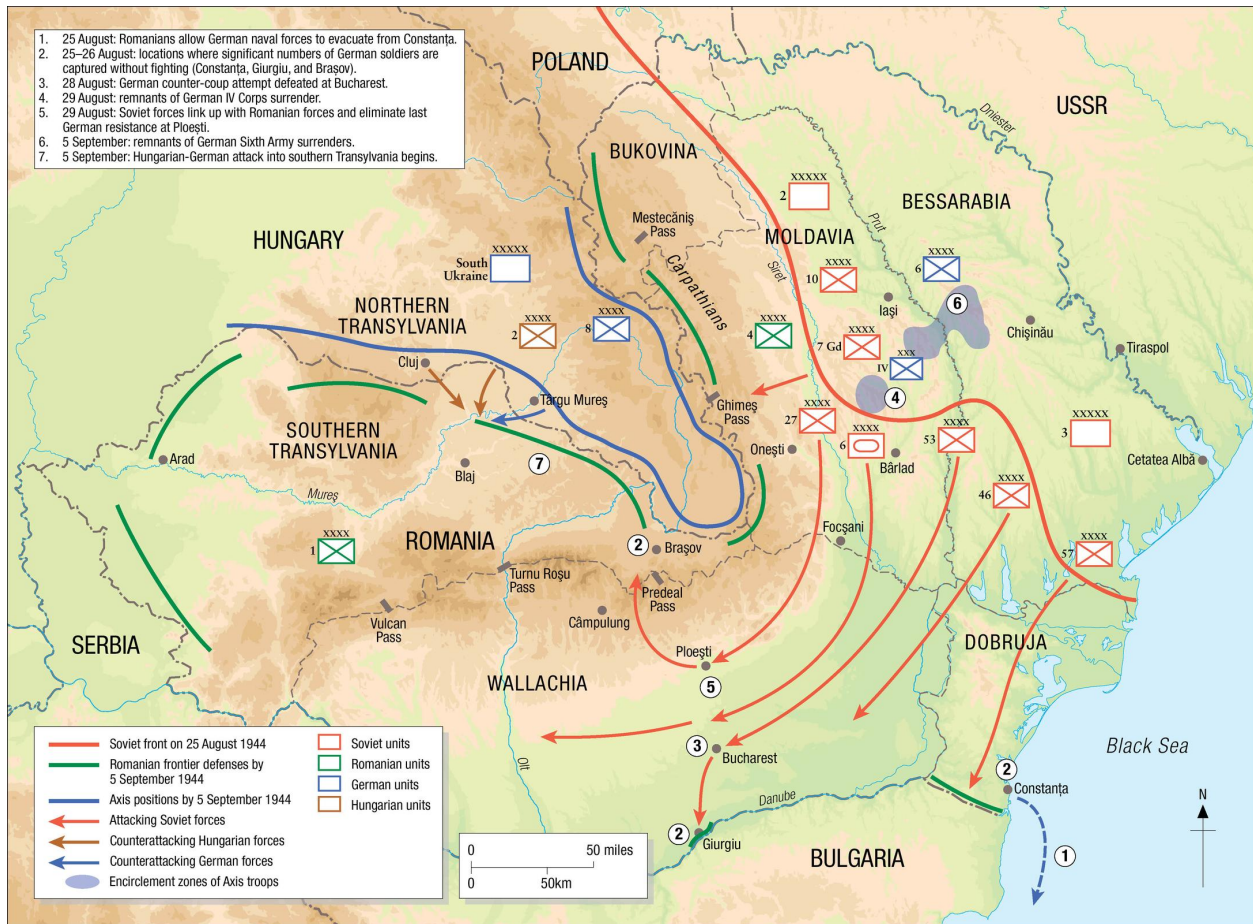
pilot to take him because radios did not work. After an aborted attempt in the morning with a twin-engine fighter-bomber, Gun crammed himself into the back of Cantacuzino's single-engine fighter after ripping out the radio. The German-made Bf-109 was hurriedly painted with US flags on the wings and fuselage in the hopes that the stars and stripes would dissuade Allied anti-aircraft gunners from opening fire. The pair took off at 5.20pm. The two-hour flight from Romania to Italy went well except for discomfort from the cold at altitude and lack of oxygen causing mild hypoxia for Gun in the cramped rear compartment. After landing, Gun and Cantacuzino were rushed to US Fifteenth Air Force headquarters in Bari where each man was debriefed and interrogated, respectively. The American staff officers not only planned how to evacuate the recently liberated Allied airmen but also how to support the Romanian troops on the ground. The US Fifteenth Air Force scheduled strafing attacks by fighter-bombers on German airfields around Bucharest for the next two days.



German prisoners of war escorted by Romanian soldiers walk in front of the Romanian Athenaeum after the end of German resistance in Bucharest. (Hulton-Deutsch Collection/Corbis via Getty Images)



In the meantime, the German 5th Flak Division's situation worsened dramatically around Ploëști as Romanian soldiers compelled the surrender of one German 'island' after another. The largest German force under General Kuderna at Păulești was nearly surrounded. Kuderna asked German Luftflotte 4 for reinforcements and was promised help from German Army Group South Ukraine. These 'reinforcements', however, were the battered German forces outside Bucharest. Just before midnight, Stahel received orders from OKH to withdraw from Otopeni and head to Ploëști to take command of German forces there. German Army Group South Ukraine added: 'The Ploëști region must be maintained at any price.' In the early hours of 28 August, Stahel surprised the Romanians and broke out advancing north-east in a long column of vehicles laden with exhausted men. Yet their luck ran out when the German force ran straight into what was left of Romanian VI Corps arriving from the Iași front in Gherghița, 20km south-west of Ploëști. Bucharest was secure. In the end, the Romanian Capital Military Command captured an estimated 8,000 German troops, including seven generals, in the capital.



## Securing Romania from the Axis, 25 August to 7 September 1944

The Romanian General Staff shifted forces from around Bucharest to join in the fighting around Ploești. German Army Group South Ukraine would not let General Kuderna attempt any retreat from around the oilfields. On 29 August, Romanian troops destroyed German resistance around Câmpina. During the afternoon, the first columns of the Soviet 6th Motorized Infantry Brigade, bringing troops of the Romanian 18th Mountain Division as well, arrived from the east and joined in the effort of defeating the remaining German forces around Ploești.



Politician Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu, a leader of the Communist Party in Romania. (The National Museum of Romanian History/Wikimedia Commons)

German resistance continued on the front. In Moldavia, German IV Corps had attempted to break out south-west of Huși to secure a route for the rest of the German Sixth Army from the Prut to Bârlad, but by the end of the day its resistance collapsed. A few small groups of German soldiers managed to avoid Soviet patrols to escape into the mountains to northern Transylvania. In Bessarabia, the Soviet Fourth Guards Army under Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front



advancing south along the Prut had run into the Soviet Fifth Shock Army under Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front that had crossed over the Dniester. Stavka ordered General Malinovsky to disengage and pull back his army to allow General Tolbukhin's army to move forward. This allowed additional units of the German Sixth Army to escape over the Prut, but they did not get far. Soviet forces contained the remains of the German Sixth Army, which now consisted of a rough hourglass shape on both sides of the Prut.



On 31 August 1944, some citizens of Bucharest welcome Soviet troops with signs and demonstrations praising Stalin and the Red Army. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

By this time, Captain Cantacuzino, who had been loaned an American P-51 fighter, had returned to Romania. He was followed by two American B-17 heavy bombers that unloaded an advance party of American air staff officers at Popești airfield south-east of Bucharest. The Americans proved unable to establish radio communications but sent Cantacuzino back to Italy with a letter to US Fifteenth Air Force. The Americans found it impossible to coordinate air support for the Romanian and Soviet troops fighting around Ploești but they moved forward with preparations to evacuate the Allied airmen who were now gathered in Bucharest.

Earlier that day, a Romanian delegation departed Bucharest for Moscow to negotiate an armistice. Iuliu Maniu refused to lead the four-man group, so

Lucrețiu Pătrășcanu took charge, arguing that as a communist he could obtain better terms from Stalin. The Romanians hoped to use the royal coup to join the Allies as an equal partner while retaining national sovereignty. Prime Minister General Sănătescu had already reached out to the commanders of the Soviet Sixth Tank and Forty-Sixth Armies to try to convince them to halt on a line from the Carpathians to the Danube while the Romanian Army finished off German forces in the rest of Romania ‘not yet occupied by the Red Army’. Stavka categorically rejected the suggestion. Instead, a new Stavka directive ordered the occupation of the rest of Romania: Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front west to the frontiers of Hungary, Yugoslavia and Bulgaria and Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front south to the border with Bulgaria. Vyacheslav Molotov, the Soviet Minister of Foreign Affairs, was in charge of armistice negotiations. He proved impervious to Romanian entreaties for concessions in the coming days. Stalin wanted Romania firmly under Soviet control.



Soviet tanks and Romanian civilians fraternize during the Red Army parade through the capital. (Mondadori via Getty Images)

On 30 August, the first Soviet soldiers reached Bucharest. Meanwhile, Romanian forces arrived from Bucharest to join the Romanian–Soviet force at Ploești for a final attack on the last remains of the German 5th Flak Division. By evening, only the group around Păulești were holding out. General Kuderna led a breakout that night, but he and most of his men were

captured soon after. Only approximately 2,000 German troops reached friendly lines in northern Transylvania. The Romanian–Soviet force took more than 9,000 German prisoners of war around Ploești. Whatever German forces remained in Wallachia and southern Transylvania were totally demoralized. Romanian policemen, and a handful of local armed communists, took another 7,000 German prisoners of war across the country.

## **CONTESTING TRANSYLVANIA**

Romania declared war on Hungary in preparation for the Soviet assault into northern Transylvania. General Malinovsky split his forces to match the new mission. He assigned the Soviet Fortieth and Seventh Guards Armies, plus a cavalry-mechanized group, to fight their way into the eastern Carpathian Mountains with the assistance of the remains of the Romanian Fourth Army. Malinovsky dedicated the Soviet Twenty-Seventh, Fifty-Third and Sixth Tank Armies for a drive through the southern Carpathian Mountains. The Romanian General Staff activated the Romanian First Army under General Nicolae Macici to hold western Wallachia and southern Transylvania against any Axis counter-attacks until the Soviet forces arrived.

On 31 August, with German resistance in Romania over, General Malinovsky organized a parade through the middle of Bucharest to announce the arrival of the Red Army. Somewhat diplomatically, at the head of the column was the Soviet 1st ‘Tudor Vladimirescu’ Romanian Volunteer Infantry Division. The Soviets had recruited Romanian prisoners of war taken after Stalingrad and formed this unit in October 1943. While they volunteered in part to escape the terrible conditions in Soviet prisoner of war camps, many also now believed in the communist cause. The Romanians in Soviet uniform kept their distance from their countrymen in Romanian uniform and proved politically loyal to the USSR, and the Communist Party in Romania. The citizens of Bucharest turned out in crowds to look at the Soviet ‘liberators’ up close. For the Jews of the city, the end of the Antonescu regime and the expulsion of the Germans came as a huge relief. Mihail Sebastian, a Romanian Jewish writer, noted in his diary, ‘People in the street are still bewildered. Great explosions of enthusiasm, but also a certain reserve. Many passersby look askance at “the applauding yids [offensive term for Jews]”.’ Also in the crowds were some American airmen.





Curious Romanian onlookers watch the Soviet column snake through Bucharest. (Universal History Archive/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)



A Soviet soldier shakes hands with a Romanian soldier in front of a crowd in Bucharest in a show of Soviet–Romanian comradeship but Romania and the USSR did not actually sign an armistice for another 12 days. (Romanian Communism Online Photo Collection #C056/The Romanian National Archives/ Wikimedia Commons)

The US Fifteenth Air Force began the evacuation of Allied former prisoners of war that day. Three waves of heavy bombers pulling duty as transport aircraft arrived, loaded passengers and departed by midday. The bomb bays of two B-17s had been retrofitted the night before to hold stretchers with men who could not walk due to sickness or malnourishment. Fortunately, there were only a few such bedridden patients. 'The Romanians standing around, helped eagerly. They look very picturesque in their colourful, musical-comedy-like uniforms. Some of them touch us and run off giggling to their friends with an "I touched an American" look on their faces. It is hard to believe that only a few days ago these people were supposed to be our enemies,' reported a flight surgeon. General Twining greeted the rescued airmen in Italy surrounded by a swarm of press photographers and journalists. The operation continued for three more days eventually ferrying nearly 1,200 American and British airmen out of Romania.



American airmen freed from captivity in Romania after the royal coup arrive in Italy in August/September 1944. (Mondadori via Getty Images)

General Malinovsky dispatched a pair of generals to find and bring back Antonescu. The Romanian Capital Military Command directed them to the local communists. The Soviet generals, plus 40 soldiers, demanded the former dictator and his cronies be turned over, citing concerns about 'crappy security'. At 5.00pm, the Soviets took Antonescu and the others to the headquarters of the Soviet Fifty-Third Army before being sent on to the

headquarters of the Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front and later on to Moscow – despite the wishes of the Romanian government to keep the leadership of the Antonescu regime in Romania. Two days later, on 2 September, the Soviets demanded the turnover of German generals and diplomats. Baron von Killinger decided he would not end up in Soviet captivity so shot first his secretary and then himself.

The focus of the fighting shifted to the Romanian and Hungarian frontier in Transylvania. On 5 September, the Hungarian Second Army, which had been subordinated to German Army Group South Ukraine, launched a dawn attack over the border with Hungarian II Corps moving south-east from Cluj and the German 8th SS Cavalry Division advancing south-west from Târgu Mureş, while the Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division drove south in between, seeking to seize the Vulcan and Turnu Roşu passes before the arrival of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front some days away. Romanian grăniceri evacuated, abandoning up to 40km of territory as they retreated to the Mureş River. There the mostly raw recruits of Romanian VI Territorial and VI Corps, both consisting almost entirely of training divisions, began arriving and digging in along the bank of the river. Additionally, because the Romanian General Staff foresaw just such an attack, the Romanian Mechanized Corps had begun arriving the day before in Blaj. The Romanian General Staff had cobbled together this last strategic reserve around the armoured detachment created during the fighting at Ploeşti adding the Romanian 8th Motorized Cavalry, 1st Cavalry and 9th Infantry Divisions. The next day, Romanian VI Territorial Corps halted the footbound infantry of Hungarian II Corps on the left flank. The Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division broke through in the centre at Luduş, however, compelling Romanian VI Corps to fall back to the Târnavă Mică River as the German 8th SS Cavalry Division followed in pursuit on the right. With whatever troops it had on hand, Romanian Mechanized Corps counter-attacked immediately. By 7 September, the crisis had passed as the line stabilized.





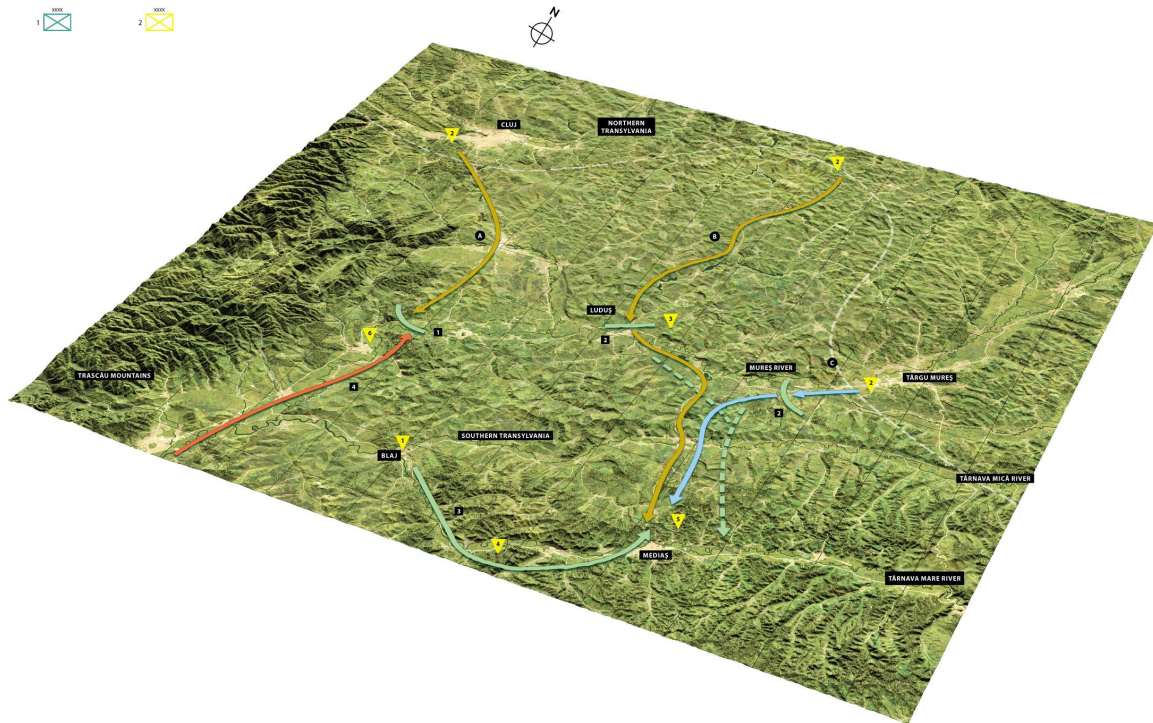
A soldier inspects a camouflaged Hungarian assault gun in the mountains of Subcarpathia at the end of August 1944. These Hungarian armoured troops were soon transferred to support the German attack on Romanian forces in southern Transylvania to try to disrupt the Soviet advance. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)

At the same time, as directed by Stavka, General Malinovsky subordinated all operational Romanian units to the 2nd Ukrainian Front. The Romanian Fourth Army went to the Soviet Twenty-Seventh Army while the Romanian First Army was assigned to the Soviet Fifty-Third Army. All organized resistance by the German Sixth Army on the Prut had ended by that time too. On 8 September, the Romanian forces along the Mureş began a counter-attack that steadily pushed the Hungarian 2nd Armoured and German 8th SS Cavalry Divisions back to the other side of the river over the next four days. Soviet forces started to pour into southern Transylvania from the south and continued to push into northern Transylvania from the east.

#### **DEFEAT OF THE GERMAN–HUNGARIAN COUNTER-ATTACK IN TRANSYLVANIA**

On 5 September, the Hungarian Second Army launches a counter-attack from northern Transylvania into southern Transylvania with a mixed Hungarian–German force to try to seize the key Vulcan and Turnu Roşu passes before the arrival of the Soviet forces. The Romanian border guards are forced back, but a Romanian force made up mostly of training units and a hotchpotch of armoured and cavalry units arrives and is able to blunt the Axis assault. By 7 September, the front line had stabilized, and a Romanian counter-attack begins the next day that soon receives Soviet support.

Note: gridlines are shown at intervals of 10km (6.2miles).



## AXIS

- A. Hungarian II Corps
- B. Hungarian 2nd Armored Division
- C. German 8th SS Cavalry Division

## ALLIES

- 1. Romanian VI Territorial Corps
- 2. Romanian VI Corps
- 3. Romanian Mechanized Corps
- 4. Soviet V Mechanized Corps

## EVENTS

- 1. On 4 September, in anticipation of an Axis attack, the Romanian Mechanized Corps begins to arrive in Blaj after being transported from around Ploesti.
- 2. On 5 September, the Hungarian Second Army launches an attack from Hungarian-occupied northern Transylvania into Romanian southern Transylvania. Hungarian II Corps drives south-east from Cluj, the German 8th SS Cavalry Division advances



south-west from Târgu Mureş, and in between the Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division attacks south. German Army Group South Ukraine hopes to seize the Vulcan and Turnu Roşu passes before the arrival of Soviet forces.

3. Romanian grăniceri retreat. Romanian VI Territorial and VI Corps, comprised mostly of training divisions, deploy to mount a defence. The Romanian left flank holds against the Hungarian infantry, but centre at Luduş breaks before the Hungarian tanks allowing German SS cavalymen to advance too. Romanian VI Corps falls back to the Târnavă Mică River.

4. Romanian tanks, motorized units and cavalry counter-attack into the gaps in the line. By 7 September, the Hungarian–German force has been fought to a standstill and the Romanian line stabilizes.

5. On 8 September, Romanian forces go on the attack all along the line, and over the next four days force back the Hungarian Second Army to the other side of the Mureş River.

6. After 12 September, Soviet forces begin to pour into southern Transylvania.



### **ROMANIAN MECHANIZED CORPS HALTS THE HUNGARIAN 2ND ARMOURD DIVISION AT LUDUŞ, 7 SEPTEMBER 1944**

On 5 September, after the remnants of German Army Group South Ukraine had retreated into Hungarian-occupied northern Transylvania, the Axis forces finally

launched a counter-attack into Romania. The Hungarian Second Army spearheaded the attack with the Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division, supported by Hungarian infantry divisions and a German SS cavalry division, in an attempt to occupy southern Transylvania and seize crucial passes through the Carpathian Mountains to block these routes before Soviet forces arrived. Hungarian armour broke through at Luduş on 6 September, compelling Romanian infantry divisions to withdraw to the Târnavă Mică River. On 7 September, Romanian Mechanized Corps launched a counter-attack to halt the enemy.

In this scene, a Romanian TACAM R-2 **(1)**, a tank destroyer consisting of a Czechoslovakian LT vz. 35 chassis with a Soviet ZiS-3 field gun mounted in a pedestal, and a Panzer IV **(2)**, pass on either side of a knocked-out and burning Hungarian 43M Zrínyi assault gun **(3)**. Romanian tanks and dismounted motorized infantry have flanked the enemy line and, supported by an anti-tank gun **(4)**, advance against Hungarian armour.





Soviet advance into south-east Europe, September–November 1944





Soviet troops walk past a sign in Romanian erected in a town square that reads: 'Romanians! The remnants of German forces crushed in southern Russia seek to escape fleeing on YOUR land. The Germans brought the war into Romania. The Germans and not the Russians are your enemies.' (Corbis via Getty Images)

The new royal regime still waited for news about the armistice. On 10 September, King Mihai I returned to Bucharest because it now seemed safer to be in the capital than out in western Wallachia where Soviet soldiers ran amok. The young monarch was dismayed by the burned-out shell of his residence, Casa Nouă, and the damage to the Royal Palace from German bombs. An invitation to lunch made to the Soviet general to discuss Soviet troops in the capital went unanswered due to fear of contact with the Romanian king before an official peace. On 12 September, with Romania now completely occupied by Soviet forces, Romanian and Soviet delegates in Moscow finally signed the document. The Soviet–Romanian Armistice consisted of 20 articles requiring Romania, among other things, to provide 12 divisions to fight Nazi Germany, cede northern Bukovina and Bessarabia, turn over Soviet prisoners of war, support Soviet occupation costs, pay reparations worth \$300 million, punish Romanian war criminals, allow Soviet censorship and dissolve groups 'of a fascist type'. The few carrots dangled after all the hits from these sticks were a continuity of Romanian civilian administration – under close Soviet supervision – and a promise to return northern Transylvania 'or of the greater part of it' to Romania. Stavka

established the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission over Romania under the leadership of now-Marshal Malinovsky. Stavka had promoted him and Tolbukhin to the rank of marshal two days earlier for the immense success of the second Iași–Chișinău offensive. The armistice between Romania and the USSR marked the completion of the turning of arms against Nazi Germany. Romania's holy war against 'Judeo-Bolshevism' became an 'anti-fascist crusade'.

# SUMMARY

The second Iași–Chișinău offensive was an unmitigated disaster for Nazi Germany. Not only did German Army Group South Ukraine immediately buckle under the hammer blows of Soviet 2nd Ukrainian and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts, but the Soviet breakthroughs at the front allowed King Mihai I to launch a perfectly timed coup that successfully neutralized German rear-echelon forces enabling Romania to abandon the Axis. German Army Group South Ukraine suffered over 150,000 troops killed or captured. While most of the German Eighth Army in Moldavia reached northern Transylvania, the German Sixth Army was almost completely destroyed and what men escaped did so by abandoning heavy weapons and equipment. In addition, the German Military Mission in Romania lost 5,000 killed and 56,000 captured, or four-fifths of its strength, during the royal coup. In exchange, the Romanians lost 8,500 killed and wounded during the fighting around Bucharest and Ploești. The Romanians suffered far greater losses on the front, however. In addition to 8,300 dead and 25,000 wounded, the Romanians counted 154,000 missing. Some of these soldiers eventually turned up, but over 120,000 became prisoners of war because the Soviets continued to treat the Romanians like the enemy for days after the royal coup and up until the armistice. The Soviets reported 13,200 ‘irrecoverable losses’ and 54,000 wounded or sick during the sweep across Romania. Truly a tremendous success for the Red Army.



Hungarian soldiers watch a 41M Turán II tank navigate across a destroyed bridge in late September 1944 after the failed Axis attack into southern Transylvania. (Süddeutsche Zeitung Photo/Alamy Stock Photo)

The Soviet occupation of Romania meant far more than the destruction of a German army group. The loss of the oil from the Prahova Valley was catastrophic for the crumbling Nazi war machine. German panzers and aircraft were just scraps of metal without oil. The US Army Air Force reduced the delivery of petroleum, oil and lubricant products to Nazi Germany before the second Iași–Chișinău offensive. From 4 April to 19 August that year, American heavy bombers destroyed 157 locomotives, 619 passenger cars, 3,010 freight cars, 1,525 tanker cars and ten additional vehicles. This success came at a cost to the civilian population. American bombs inflicted civilian losses of 7,600 killed and 7,600 wounded and wrecked 46,523 houses. The damage to the railways forced Romania to rely more on oil barges going up the Danube to Nazi Germany. The British Royal Air Force assisted by night bombing some cities and, together with the Red Air Force, by mining the river. The Western Allies could limit production and reduce deliveries of oil from Romania only by so much from the air, however. The Soviets halted any more oil from reaching Nazi Germany by seizing the ground. Consequently, the Wehrmacht was hamstrung because of a lack of fuel. For Hitler's last roll of the dice at the end of the year during the Ardennes Offensive, or, as it is better known, the Battle of the Bulge, the

German Army had to hope to capture enough fuel during the advance to reach its objectives.

The royal coup compounded the loss of Romania by turning its armed forces against Nazi Germany. While it is extremely unlikely German Army Group South Ukraine could have held the FNB Line against the Red tsunami for any amount of time, had Antonescu not been toppled, Romanian reserves probably would have been thrown into the fray and might have slowed Soviet 2nd Ukrainian and 3rd Ukrainian Fronts long enough for more German forces to escape into northern Transylvania and for Romanian forces to organize a national redoubt in southern Transylvania. A new Axis line might have formed along the Carpathian Mountains. Instead, because of King Mihai I and his small group of conspirators, the Romanians not only sped the advance of the Soviets but then fought alongside them against the Germans for the last nine months of World War II. The Red Army was suffering from manpower shortages, so the Romanian Army was a welcome source of troops to fill gaps in the line. Moreover, the continued Romanian civilian administration meant fewer Soviet soldiers had to be left behind in Romania to maintain law and order.

The resounding triumph of the second Iași–Chișinău offensive also allowed the Red Army to overrun most of the rest of the Balkans. The loss of Romania forced OKW and OKH to pull back German forces from Greece, Bulgaria and Albania to prevent them from being cut off and destroyed. Therefore, Nazi Germany lost even more resources, and its important trade link to neutral Turkey. Soviet 2nd Ukrainian Front pushed into Hungary as Soviet 3rd Ukrainian Front drove into Bulgaria, and then Yugoslavia. The Soviet occupation of these countries had not just immediate military consequences but also delayed political consequences. Stalin had his eye on expanding Soviet influence into south-eastern Europe and making the region a Soviet sphere of influence after the war. Soviet boots on the ground gave the Soviet dictator the power to do so by supporting local communist parties in these countries. Anxious to safeguard post-war British interests, Winston Churchill met with Stalin in Moscow in October 1944 and the two reached an understanding that became known as the ‘percentages agreement’. This name arose from the paper Churchill wrote assigning percentages of predominance in each country, with Romania and Bulgaria respectively 90 per cent and 75 per cent to the Soviets, Yugoslavia split 50 per cent, and Greece 90 per cent to the Western Allies. Already the Soviets and Western Allies had started to



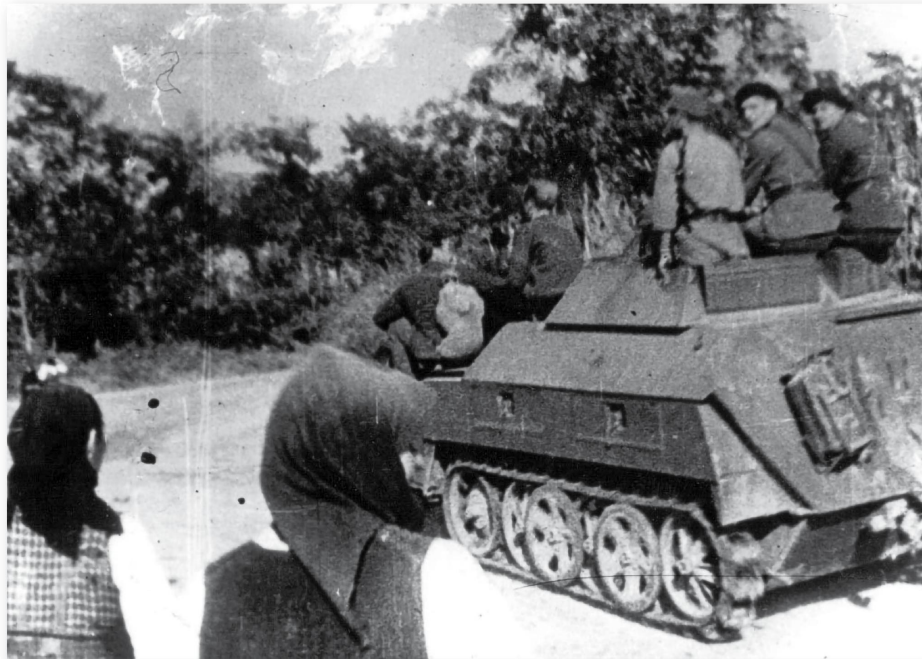
divide Europe between West and East, a division that would solidify during the Cold War.



A column of Soviet trucks, Lend-Lease vehicles from the United States, drive by a group of Romanian villagers in September 1944. (Sovfoto/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

The legacy of Romania's turning of arms against Nazi Germany remains hotly debated. For King Mihai I and his co-conspirators it proved a disappointment. Romania did not obtain better conditions in the armistice. It quickly became apparent that the Americans and British were not going to act as a balance against the Soviets. Following the example of the Americans and British who had set up the first Allied Control Commission in Italy, which largely excluded the Soviets from decision making, the Soviets did not allow the Americans and British to play a significant role in the Allied (Soviet) Control Commission in Romania. The Soviet occupation authorities under General Malinovsky enforced the terms of the armistice while concurrently supporting local Romanian communists to demand more power in the new royal government. The Romanian Communist Party steadily consolidated power, eventually forcing the young monarch to abdicate and go into exile at the end of 1947 – just over three years later. Nevertheless, Mihai I ensured the rest of Romania did not become a battlefield and likely saved countless Romanian lives. Romanian communists rewrote the story of the royal coup

after taking power. In this version of events, the people, led by the Communist Party in Romania, rose up to depose Antonescu. In fact, 23 August 1944 even became Romania's national day celebrated with parades and events every year. The final nine months of the 'anti-Hitlerite War' became the focus of official memory, although the preceding 26 months of the holy war remained in popular memory. After the fall of communism, the events became contested because some viewed the royal coup as a bold triumph, but others saw the events as a cowardly betrayal. Some now argued that Mihai I did the dirty work for the Soviets and naively delivered Romania into Stalin's hands. Overall, many historians continue to make great claims about how Romania shortened World War II by many months by switching sides. The reality is likely more modest, perhaps by a few weeks, and one must take into account how long Romania prolonged the war by fighting so committedly alongside Nazi Germany before the royal coup.



Romanian peasants watch Romanian troops advance in a German half-track in Transylvania.  
(Romanian Communism Online Photo Collection #MA058/The Romanian National Archives/Wikimedia Commons)

# THE BATTLEFIELD TODAY

The former battlefield of the second Iași–Chișinău offensive today stretches across three countries: Romania, the Republic of Moldova and Ukraine. (After the USSR annexed northern Bukovina and Bessarabia in 1940, and again in 1944, it did not keep the previous administrative borders; northern Bukovina and the northern and southern parts of Bessarabia became part of the Ukrainian SSR while the remainder joined with a piece of territory east of the Dniester to create the Moldavian SSR.) While physical remains of the front line in Romania from April to August 1944 are the same in all three countries, the commemorative landscapes remembering the battle are very different between Romania and the two former Soviet republics.



A stone cross in the small town of Moțca on the former Iași front in Romania. The centre inscription reads in part: '14 April 1944 In Memory to those fallen in battle against atheist communism!' (Grant Harward)

The traces of trenches, dugouts and shelters constructed by both sides are clearly visible in many areas – especially in wooded or hilly areas that were not ploughed up by farmers in the intervening decades. Casings of bullets and shells as well as fins of mortars can still be picked up off the ground. Older locals recall, as children, playing with rusting hand grenades found in the woods near places such as Stâncea Roznovanu close to the Prut north-east of Iași where German troops held the front. Shell craters still pockmark the ground. In some places, such as outside Târgu Neamț, one can find the crumbling remains of reinforced concrete bunkers from the Axis fortifications and an enormous anti-tank ditch dug by Romanian labourers still cuts through the hillside. In Romania, behind what was the Iași front in Moldavia, 'heroes' cemeteries' for the Romanian soldiers killed in the fighting in the spring and summer of 1944 exist in many towns and villages. Soviet slain repose in

some of these military cemeteries as well. Since the fall of communism in Romania in 1989, locals have raised many markers to commemorate those killed in the bloody fighting that took place in 1944, often in the form of Christian crosses. Candles, icons and wreaths show that these have become important sites of memory. Often the words on the memorials convey an anti-communist message. In Moldova and Ukraine, however, the focus is on the Soviet soldier. Again, one can find military cemeteries in cities and towns close to the old front. In some places, such as Bălți, local organizations have restored or updated the original Soviet neo-classical design since the collapse of the Soviet Union. Bilingual messages celebrate the eternal glory of the Soviet fallen to defeat fascism and defend the fatherland. It remains to be seen if these sites to Soviet victory will continue to be well-maintained as attitudes shift due to the current conflict in Ukraine. Over the last 25 years, German groups have started locating and reburying German dead left in unmarked graves by the Soviets after the fighting, with over 5,000 individuals now resting in marked plots including in the main cemetery of Chişinău. Many of the Romanian, German and Soviet dead still do not rest in peace.





A recently renovated Soviet-era monument to the Red Army soldiers who fought in the first and second Iași–Chișinău offensives in the city of Bălți in the Republic of Moldova. (Grant Harward)

Bucharest offers many other interesting attractions including the crumbling ruins of the palace of Vlad the Impaler (also known as Vlad Dracula), an outdoor village museum and a unique mixture of architectural styles. A real estate boom after the fall of communism means much of the forest north of the city where Romanians and Germans fought was developed. Băneasa and Otopeni airfields both became airports – the latter is the country’s busiest international hub. A visitor to Romania may also still visit many of the key locations of the fighting 80 years ago in Bucharest and Ploești. Unfortunately, urban expansion, development, and renewal projects did take a toll over the last eight decades, in particular the decision in the 1980s by communist dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu to raze much of the historic centre of Bucharest to construct a massive parliamentary palace (the second-largest office building in the world after the Pentagon) with residential blocs nearby for the party

elite. Nevertheless, the North Train Station looks much as it did when it was targeted by American heavy bombers. There is a monument to the Allied airmen killed in battles over the sky in Romania in the large Cișmigiu Park downtown. As of yet there is no memorial to the Romanian civilians who died by American bombs. Many historic buildings remain, including the Royal Palace where King Mihai I and the conspirators moved after arresting Antonescu: the Superior War School (today the National Defence University) where the German Army Military Mission had its office; and the Athénée Palace hotel where Romanians and Germans mingled before the turning of arms. The capital also boasts the largest Soviet military cemetery in Romania. A 10-foot-tall heroic statue of a Soviet soldier, which originally stood on a towering pedestal elsewhere, was relocated to a modest plinth amid the Soviet graves after the fall of communism. A wall and guard prevent the cemetery from being vandalized.



A communist-era monument in the city of Târgu Mureş celebrating the Romanian Army fighting to regain northern Transylvania from Hungary. (Grant Harward)

The memorial landscape changed for the battlefields of Transylvania after the turning of arms. The Romanian Communist Party celebrated the Romanian Army's victories and erected monolithic statues and monuments in city centres. Today, these sites are used to commemorate both the campaign against the USSR and the campaign against Nazi Germany. Soviet military cemeteries dot the landscape, although many have now fallen into disrepair. A traveller will also enjoy the beautiful countryside and medieval architecture of historic Transylvania with its diverse population.

# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Axworthy, Mark, *The Romanian Army of World War II*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 1991.
- Axworthy, Mark, Cornell Scafes and Christian Craciunoiu, *Third Axis, Fourth Ally: Romanian Armed Forces in the European War, 1941–1945*, St Petersburg, FL: Hailer Publishing, 1995.
- Bărboi, Vasile, Gheroghe Ionița, Victor Atanasiu, și Alesandru Duțu, eds, *Armata Română în Vâltoarea Războiului*, Bucharest: Editura ‘Vasile Cârlova’, 2002.
- Bernád, Dénes, *Rumanian Aces of World War 2*, Oxford: Osprey Publishing, 2003.
- Citino, Robert, *The Wehrmacht’s Last Stand: The German Campaigns of 1944–1945*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2020.
- Deletant, Dennis, *Hitler’s Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime, Romania 1940–1944*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.
- Erickson, John, *The Road to Berlin: Continuing the History of Stalin’s War with Germany*, Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1983.
- Giurescu, Dinu C., *Romania in the Second World War*, translated by Eugenia Elena Popescu, Boulder, CO: East European Monographs, 2000.
- Glantz, David M., *Red Storm Over the Balkans: The Failed Soviet Invasion of Romania, Spring 1944*, Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 2007.
- Harward, Grant T., *Romania’s Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust*, Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021.
- Porter, Ivor, *Michael of Romania: The King and the Country*, Stroud, UK: Sutton Publishing, 2005.
- Schönherr, Klaus, *Luptele Wehrmachtului în România, 1944*, 2nd edition, translated by Elena Matei, Bucharest: Editura militară, 2015.
- Sebastian, Mihail, *Journal, 1935–1944: The Fascist Years*, translated by Patrick Camiller, Chicago, IL: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.

Stout, Jay A., *Fortress Ploesti: The Campaign to Destroy Hitler's Oil*,  
Havertown, PA: Casemate, 2003.

Truxal, Luke, *Uniting Against the Reich: The American Air War in Europe*,  
Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 2023.



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr Grant T. Harward obtained a BA in History from Brigham Young University in 2009, an MSc in the Second World War in Europe from the University of Edinburgh in 2010 and a PhD in History from Texas A&M University in 2018. He received a Fulbright scholarship to Romania in 2016–17, which helped him write the award-winning book *Romania's Holy War: Soldiers, Motivation, and the Holocaust* (Cornell University Press, 2021). He is currently a historian at the US Army Center of Military History.

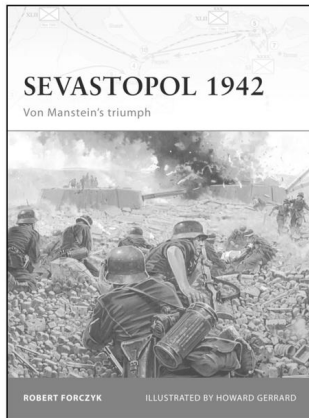
# ILLUSTRATOR

Johnny Shumate works as a freelance illustrator and lives in Nashville, Tennessee. He began his career in 1987 after graduating from Austin Peay State University. His greatest influences are Angus McBride, Don Troiani and Édouard Detaille.

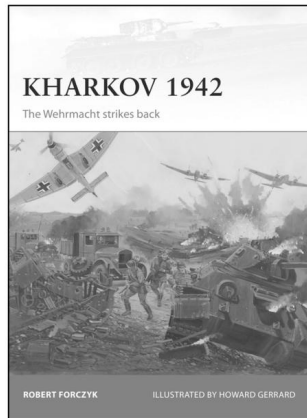
---

## Other titles in the series

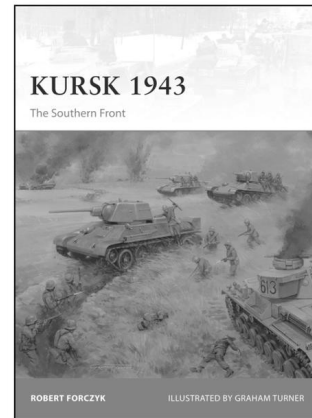
---



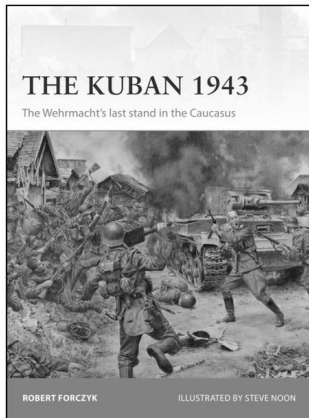
**CAM No:** 189 • **ISBN:** 9781846032219



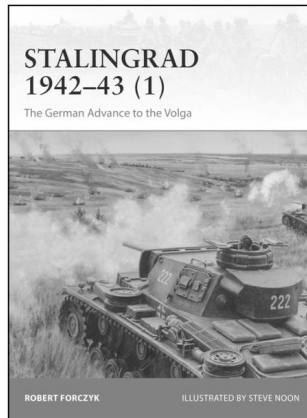
**CAM No:** 254 • **ISBN:** 9781780961576



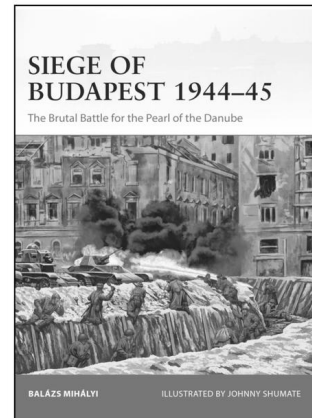
**CAM No:** 305 • **ISBN:** 9781472816900



**CAM No:** 318 • **ISBN:** 9781472822598

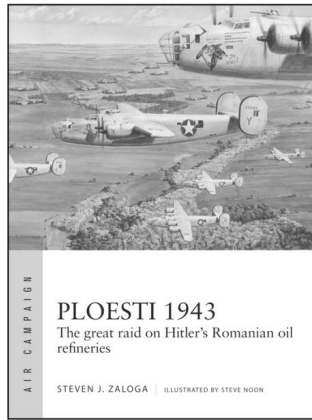


**CAM No:** 359 • **ISBN:** 9781472842657

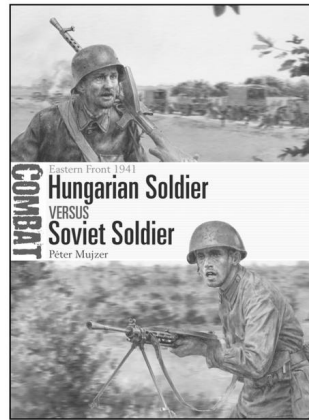


**CAM No:** 377 • **ISBN:** 9781472848482

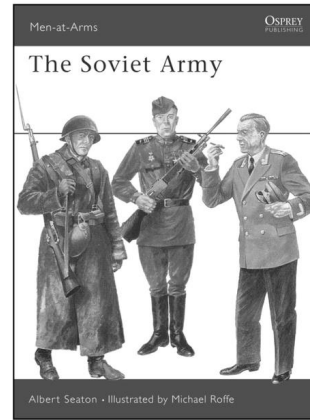
Discover more at [www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com)



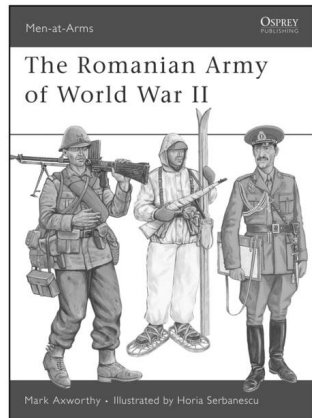
**ACM No: 12 • ISBN: 9781472831804**



**CBT No: 57 • ISBN: 9781472845658**



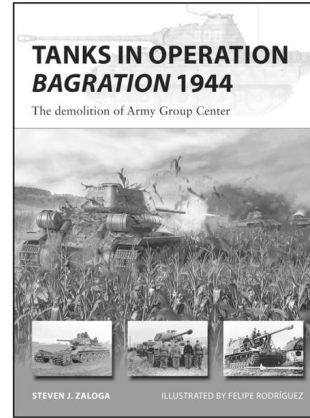
**MAA No: 29 • ISBN: 9780850451139**



**MAA No: 246 • ISBN: 9781855321694**



**MAA No: 311 • ISBN: 9781855326392**



**NVG No: 318 • ISBN: 9781472853950**

OSPREY PUBLISHING

Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

Kemp House, Chawley Park, Cumnor Hill, Oxford OX2 9PH, UK

29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, Ireland

1385 Broadway, 5th Floor, New York, NY 10018, USA

E-mail: [info@ospreypublishing.com](mailto:info@ospreypublishing.com)

[www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com)

OSPREY is a trademark of Osprey Publishing Ltd

First published in Great Britain in 2024

This electronic edition published in 2024 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc.

© Osprey Publishing Ltd, 2024

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

PB ISBN: 9781472861641

eBook ISBN: 9781472861610

ePDF ISBN: 9781472861627

XML ISBN: 9781472861634

Maps by [www.bounford.com](http://www.bounford.com)

3D BEVs by Paul Kime

Typeset by PDQ Digital Media Solutions, Bungay, UK

Osprey Publishing supports the Woodland Trust, the UK's leading woodland conservation charity.

To find out more about our authors and books visit

[www.ospreypublishing.com](http://www.ospreypublishing.com). Here you will find our full range of publications, as well as exclusive online content, details of forthcoming



events and the option to sign up for our newsletters. You can also sign up for Osprey membership, which entitles you to a discount on purchases made through the Osprey site and access to our extensive online image archive.

**Front cover main illustration:** The Romanian Mechanized Corps halts the Hungarian 2nd Armoured Division at Luduș on 7 September 1944. (Johnny Shumate)

**Title page photograph:** Soviet troops walk past a Romanian sign in a town square. (Corbis via Getty Images)