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RUMANIA & THE RUMANIANS

CHAPTER I

AN HISTORICAL OUTLINE

The country known between the two Great Wars as Greater Rumania has had twenty-three centuries of violent and dramatic history. From about 400 B.C., when it was first colonized by Thracian tribes, up to the present day this territory has been the victim of many invasions and the scene of many migrations. It has been conquered and ruled by dozens of races and peoples who have all left their mark upon the country and its inhabitants. To-day the Rumanians form an island of Latinity between the Slavonic peoples and one of the last Asiatic invaders of Europe, the Hungarians. The language and culture of the Rumanians, although containing many elements of Slavonic, Germanic and other origins, are closely related to the civilization of Italy, France and Spain.

To the foreigner who visits Rumania for the first time this country and its mixed population seems full of inexplicable and insoluble contradictions. The numerous problems confronting Rumania and the Rumanians in the twentieth century have their roots in the historical development of the past. The issues of the present day cannot be understood or solved unless they are examined in the light of this history. In order to analyse the condition of contemporary Rumania, it is therefore necessary to present a short outline of Rumanian history.

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THE ANCIENT RUMANIANS. The first permanent colonization of Rumania, after the Celtic period which belongs to the twilight before the dawn of history, was carried out by the Dacians who occupied Transylvania, Wallachia and the Banat in the fourth century B.C. Knowing how to exploit the agricultural and mineral wealth of the country the Dacians attained a comparatively high standard of civilization. They were an industrious people, equally skilled in the arts of peace and war. During the last century B.C. the Dacians under King Boirebista rose to the peak of their power. They ruled over a considerable part of South-Eastern Europe. On Boirebista's death this vast empire collapsed. All that remained to the Dacians was the territory which they had first occupied.

The Roman Empire had been seriously disturbed by the growing menace on its north-eastern frontiers. The Emperors Claudius and Domitian were therefore anxious to stabilize their hold upon the Roman provinces in that area. As a preliminary step the provinces at present occupied by the States of Yugoslavia and Bulgaria were added to the domains of Rome. The wealth of Dacia and the wish to consolidate the newly conquered Roman provinces tempted the Romans to invade Dacia. King Decebal not only succeeded in defending the country but inflicted several heavy defeats on the Roman legions. He even imposed an annual tribute on the Roman Empire which was paid to him promptly.

While resisting successfully any Roman attempts to subjugate Dacia, Decebal welcomed Roman traders, craftsmen and workers and encouraged the spread of Roman civilization. At the same time he

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organized the defence of the country from his capital Sarmisegetusa, situated on the edge of the South Carpathian Mountains.

Soon after Trajan became emperor, war broke out between him and Decebal. In the years A.D. 100–106 Trajan defeated and conquered the Dacians. The many bridges, military highways and fortresses built by the emperor for this campaign, of which ruins can still be found to-day, show that this Roman conquest was not an easy one.

‘DACIA FELIX.’ Conquest was followed by systematic colonization. Many military camps, towns and roads were built by the Romans all over Southern Rumania. Colonists from Italy and the vast Roman possessions were brought here to strengthen this outpost of the empire, to cultivate the fertile soil, to develop trade and to spread Roman culture. The majority of the original inhabitants readily adopted Roman rule and civilization, although a minority retreated into mountainous Transylvania, which means ‘the country beyond the forest’. There followed, according to one theory, a period of great prosperity during which Dacians and Roman settlers lived peacefully side by side, intermarried and gave birth to a new people; they were the Daco-Rumanians who spoke a Latin dialect, which was the origin of the Rumanian language.

Parallel with this process of Romanization there went great progress in agriculture, trade, transport and mining.¹ Dacia under the rule of Rome was

¹ The salt and gold mines of Transylvania were already exploited by the Romans.

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prosperous, and the province became known as 'Dacia Felix'—happy Dacia.

THE ROMAN RETREAT. This favourable development in the most exposed province of the Roman Empire was interrupted and its achievements were almost completely destroyed by the pressure of barbarian tribes advancing into Europe from the east. So dangerous was the position of the Roman legions in Dacia, who were unable to stop the continuous raids of the Goths, that the Emperor Aurelian decided to abandon this province. The evacuation of the Roman legions and the Roman administration was completed by about A.D. 275. Most of the Daco-Rumanian population probably remained in the territory between the Danube and the Carpathians.

CENTURIES OF INVASIONS. The retreat of the Romans to the southern banks of the Danube opened the floodgates of invasion. From the third to the tenth century a host of nations passed through Rumania on their way to the west and south.

The spearhead of the barbarians was formed by the Visigoths, a military race, who had no difficulty in subjugating the country. During their short stay in Rumania the Visigoths were converted to the Christian faith. The process of conversion started from Constantinople, and the Rumanians, too, adopted the new creed. Thus the Rumanians, a people of partly Roman origin and Latin speech, remained attached to the Eastern Church, when its separation from the Papacy followed the separation of the Western and Eastern Roman Empires. To-day the great majority of Rumanians belong to the Orthodox Church.

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The Visigoths were conquered by the Huns who, about A.D. 375, broke into Europe from Asia. The Visigoths became their vassals, and when the Huns left Rumania after a short period, they took the Visigoths with them to fight in their wars which devastated a great part of Europe.

The flow of peoples who invaded Rumania continued. The next tide brought the Gepides, also a Germanic race. They settled down permanently. The Gepides were engaged in continuous warfare and maintained their supremacy over their neighbours, until their defeat by the Langobards and Avars in the sixth century.

THE SLAVS. The Gepides retired into the Carpathian Mountains. The Avars occupied the vast Danubian plains, which formed their base for expeditions far into Central Europe. Their raids were checked by Charlemagne who expelled them from their western outposts. During this time, that is, in the eighth century, the Gepides fought as auxiliaries of the Avars; soon after the fall of the latter, their name disappears from history.

Before and during the Avar period occurred the great influx of the Slavs into the Danubian and Balkan lands. Besides the Balkans, the Slav tribes settled in considerable numbers in Transylvania. Nearly all the oldest place-names of the East Carpathians are Slavonic, and the Rumanian language contains many Slavonic words.

THE BULGARIAN EMPIRES. The seventh and eighth centuries saw the coming of the Bulgars, a race of Turkish nomads from the east who, however, later

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became absorbed by their Slavonic subjects. In the seventh century the Bulgars were already encamped north of the Danube, in the territory of the modern Rumania. Later they moved the centre of their power across the Danube, where they founded the state afterwards known as Bulgaria, though still ruling over much of modern Rumania.

The first Bulgarian Empire was at the height of its power between 893 and 972 B.C. and its Tsar Boris was one of the great conquerors of that age. This empire was in its turn subdued by Basil II, Emperor of Byzantium, in the eleventh century; the Bulgars and their Rumanian subjects were, however, able to continue to observe their own traditions, except that they were involved with the rest of the Eastern Empire in the final Schism between the Eastern Church and Rome. In the next century the Bulgarian Empire became an independent power once more, and the Bulgarian Tsars began to style themselves 'Emperors of the Vlachs and Bulgars'. The Rumanians are still called Vlachs or Wallachs by their neighbours; then, as now, there were many of them living as nomadic shepherds outside the boundaries of what eventually became known as Rumania. The Vlachs of the Second Bulgarian Empire were those of the Central Balkans and Thessaly, and Greek chroniclers tell of autonomous Vlach chieftains in those parts.

THE MAGYARS. At the close of the ninth century the Magyars crossed the Carpathians, conquered the rising duchies of the Banat and the Crisana and began to settle in the Hungarian plain. During the subsequent decades, their westward advance being

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checked by Otto the Great, they penetrated Transylvania, subjecting the local population. In the eleventh and twelfth centuries they colonized the east and south of that country with the Szekelys, a people akin to themselves, and with German settlers (the 'Transylvanian Saxons').

THE GREAT CONTROVERSY. The Magyar invasion of Europe was the last important stage in the Migration of Nations. To this time is traced the origins of Rumania as a nation.

Before turning to the creation and development of the two Rumanian principalities, mention must be made of the great controversy which centres round the question of the history of the Rumanians *during* the Migration of Nations. Although this historical controversy may seem of purely theoretical interest, it still plays a prominent part in contemporary politics.

Some historians, mostly Hungarians, hold that at the time of the Roman evacuation of Dacia the Daco-Rumanian population withdrew to the lands south of the Danube. According to this theory they recrossed the river in the thirteenth century and later penetrated into Transylvania, that is, *after* the Hungarians had occupied this territory. This theory is used to support the Hungarian claim to Transylvania.

The contrary theory is that the majority of the Daco-Rumanians remained in the lands between the Carpathians and the Danube after the Roman withdrawal. They were subjugated by numerous invaders, assimilated some of them and always managed to preserve their national character or at least their language, which is the instrument of

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national consciousness. In times of danger they retreated into the mountains, just as those Dacians who centuries before wanted to escape the rule of Rome. Owing to the numerous invasions and colonizations, especially of Slavs, a wedge was driven between the Macedo- and Istro-Rumanians, who to-day live in Macedonia and Dalmatia, and the bulk of the Rumanians north of the Danube.

This latter view is put forward by Rumanian writers, who urge in support of it that the Rumanian rite was originally Slavonic and not Greek, as it would have been had the Rumanians immigrated from the south. It is also argued that the Rumanian migration from the north to the south is reflected in the naming of Eastern Wallachia which the Rumanians call 'Muntenia', i.e. 'country of the mountains'—transferring the name of their former home to a country known for its plains. One thing is certain: the two principalities had their origin in Transylvania. Wallachia developed to the south of it, Moldavia to the east.

THE TWO PRINCIPALITIES. Wallachia and Moldavia were created during the second half of the thirteenth and the first half of the fourteenth century. The emergence of the two Rumanian semi-independent States was due to a great extent to a temporary ebb in the movement of peoples. Their rise was furthered by one unfavourable and one favourable circumstance. The ever-increasing pressure of the Hungarians drove many Rumanians from Transylvania into the lands beyond the Carpathians. And the decay of the Slavonic States south and west of the

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Danube gave the Rumanians an opportunity to consolidate their position.

While the formation of the two principalities was the logical result of historical development and the realization of national aspirations nascent since the ninth century, it also led to a considerable weakening of the Rumanian element in Transylvania. Most of the *boiars*¹ migrated to Wallachia and Moldavia and those who remained were quickly absorbed by the Hungarian nobility.² For the great majority of the Rumanian population of Transylvania there began a long period of economic, political and national subservience to the Magyars.

The foundation of the two principalities was already overshadowed by the impending conflict between the Turks and the European peoples opposing them, which lasted into the present century and played a decisive part in the history of Rumania. When the two principalities were formed, the Turks had not yet advanced far enough to crush them, as the Hungarians had done with their predecessors in the ninth century.

Nevertheless, the first rulers of Wallachia and Moldavia had to contend with many dangers. It is indeed surprising that the two Rumanian States could be established at all and survive in the face of extreme adversity. They found themselves constantly menaced by all their neighbours. Wallachia was from the outset involved in conflicts with

¹ Landed nobility.

² One of the most striking examples is the family of Hunyadi Janos, a Magyar noble of Rumanian descent, who became famous as one of the greatest military leaders against the Turks. His son, Matthias Corvinus, was King of Hungary.

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Turkey and Hungary, Moldavia with Hungary, Poland and Turkey. And more than once Wallachia and Moldavia were in different camps fighting each other.

The short periods of relative peace and prosperity were achieved by the Rumanian princes by diplomacy rather than by decisive military victories. This is not strange in view of the great disparity between their resources and those of their major neighbours. Up to the early sixteenth century therefore the most profitable policy was that of balancing one enemy against the other.

Although there was some important progress during the brief intervals of peace, Moldavia and Wallachia could not stem the advance of the Turkish tide. This was prepared by the steady penetration of the principalities by Byzantine trade and institutions which is reflected in the structure of the Rumanian States at that time. The *voivods*¹ copied the absolutism of Constantinople, choosing their counsellors from the clergy and the big landowning families, and treated the country and its inhabitants as their personal property. The economic decline of the peasantry, continuous warfare amongst pretenders to the Rumanian thrones and against Turks, Hungarians and Poles, weakened the country to such a degree that it could not offer successful resistance to the Turks when they resumed their advance to the north.

UNDER TURKISH RULE. The death of Louis of Hungary in the battle of Mohacs against the Turks brought the end of Rumanian semi-independence

¹ Dukes or princes.