The German Military Mission to Romania, 1940–1941

By RICHARD L. DİNARDO

When one thinks of security assistance and the training of foreign troops, Adolf Hitler’s Germany is not a country that typically comes to mind. Yet there were two instances in World War II when Germany did indeed deploy troops to other countries that were in noncombat circumstances. The countries in question were Finland and Romania, and the German military mission to Romania is the subject of this article. The activities of the German mission to Romania are discussed and analyzed, and some conclusions and hopefully a few takeaways are offered that could be relevant for military professionals today.

Creation of the Mission

The matter of how the German military mission to Romania came into being can be covered relatively quickly. In late June 1940, the Soviet Union demanded from Romania the cession of both Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina. The only advice Germany could give to the Romanian government was to agree to surrender the territory.1 Fearful of further Soviet encroachments, the Romanian government made a series of pleas to Germany including a personal appeal from King Carol II to Hitler for German military assistance in the summer of 1940. Hitler, however, was not yet willing to undertake such a step. Thus, all Romanian requests were rebuffed with Hitler telling Carol that Romania brought its own problems upon itself by its prior pro-Allied policy. Hitler also

Finnish Volunteer Battalion of German Waffen-SS return home from front in 1943
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**Report Date:** 2013  
**Report Type:**  
**Dates Covered:** 00-00-2013 to 00-00-2013  
**Title and Subtitle:** The German Military Mission to Romania, 1940-1941  
**Author(s):**  
**Performing Organization:** National Defense University, Joint Force Quarterly, 260 Fifth Avenue, Building 64, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319  
**Performing Organization Report Number:**  
**Distribution/Availability Statement:** Approved for public release; distribution unlimited  
**Security Classification of:**  
- a. Report: unclassified  
- b. Abstract: unclassified  
- c. This Page: unclassified  
**Limitation of Abstract:** Same as Report (SAR)  
**Number of Pages:** 7  
**Name of Responsible Person:**
urged the Romanian government to settle its problems with Hungary peaceably.2

Having been urged by Hitler to attain a peaceful solution, Romania and Hungary then asked Hitler and Italy’s Benito Mussolini to act as arbitrators in their dispute over the contested area of Transylvania.3 Much to Romania’s chagrin, however, Hitler and Mussolini tried to split the difference but in Hungary’s favor. On August 30, 1940, Germany, Italy, Hungary, and Romania signed the Second Vienna Award. By the terms of that agreement, Romania had to cede about half of Transylvania to Hungary.4

The territorial losses incurred during the summer of 1940 caused considerable political instability in Romania. The Second Vienna Award, coming after Romania’s agreeing to conduct a pro-Axis foreign policy, completed the discrediting of Carol’s government. Carol appointed Romania’s top military leader, General Ion Antonescu, as prime minister on September 4, 1940. Antonescu promptly forced Carol’s abdication on September 6, with exile following soon thereafter. The now vacant Romanian throne was then occupied by King Michael, a callow youth of 19, while Antonescu assumed dictatorial powers and the title of “Leader,” much in keeping with his Nazi and Fascist colleagues.5

With Antonescu’s ascension to power, the relationship between Germany and Romania warmed considerably. Antonescu began by promising closer collaboration with Germany. He also renewed the request for German military assistance, with the idea of having Germans train and reorganize the Romanian army. This time, Hitler agreed and on September 19, 1940, he decided to send a military mission to Romania. The improvement in relations would culminate on November 23, 1940, with Romania’s adherence to the Tripartite Pact.6

To be precise, Germany actually sent four missions to Romania. The umbrella organization was the German military mission, commanded by Army General Erik Hansen, who was also the military attaché to Bucharest. Hansen also commanded the German army mission (Deutsches Heeres Mission in Rumänien, or DHM) to Romania.

The DHM had two principal missions. The first was to create air defenses around the vital oil region of Romania in the vicinity of Ploesti and the Black Sea port of Constanța. Also involved was the regulation of air space over the defended areas. The second mission was to modernize the Romanian air force. The DHM was more successful in completing the first mission. Speidel and his staff were able to use both Romanian and German materiel and procedures to make Ploesti one of the most heavily defended targets against air attacks. This was to prove invaluable in the initial Romanian participation in Operation Barbarossa. Between late June and mid-October 1941, Ploesti and Constanța were attacked 91 times by Soviet aircraft. Led by the efforts of the Luftwaffe’s Jagd Geschwader 52, the combined Romanian-German defense brought down some 81 Soviet aircraft.7

Modernizing the Romanian air force proved a bridge too far for the DHM to travel. Bringing the air force up to date assumed growing importance for Germany as Romanian participation in Barbarossa became a certainty. The most notable problem was the veritable plethora of aircraft used by the Romanian air force. This mélange included the form of a division-size unit. At first, this was to be Friedrich Wilhelm von Rothkirch’s und Panthen’s 13th Motorized Infantry Division, but was later expanded to include Hans Valentin Hube’s 16th Panzer Division as well. Several infantry divisions were added in the course of 1941 as German plans first for the invasion of Greece and later the Soviet Union took shape.8

Like the DLM, the DHM had two missions. Aside from the training mission, the German units were to assist the Romanian force in erecting defenses against a possible Soviet invasion, although the mere presence of German units in Romania did act as a guarantee against further Soviet encroachments. The second mission was to train the Romanian army up to a level that was as close to German standards as possible. These units would play a part in the invasion of the Soviet Union. Hitler had distinctly mentioned this in his December 5, 1940, speech to the heads of the Wehrmacht. Both Finland and Romania are mentioned as possible allies in the execution of Operation Barbarossa in Hitler’s first official directive on the subject issued December 18, 1940.9

The DHM’s ability to carry out its training mission was hampered by several factors outside of its control. The first was an

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Aside from these problems, members of the German military mission in Romania, especially in the DHM, had to avoid stepping into the minefield of ethnic minority politics. For the DHM, this centered around the Volksdeutsche (ethnic German) community in Romania. Like all ethnic German communities in that part of Europe, the Volksdeutsche in Romania had major connections to the Nazi Party, and the Nazis had newspapers and political organizations in Romania. Not surprisingly, German-language newspapers ran articles welcoming the German military presence.

A sticky issue for the DHM was the fact that the Volksdeutsche in Romania were subject to conscription and service in the Romanian army, which they were resistant to for a variety of reasons. Matters were made more complex by the presence of the Schutzstaffel (SS) recruiters in Romania who were eagerly seeking ever more members for Heinrich Himmler’s expanding SS empire. The Romanians naturally objected because they sought this manpower for their own army, and avoiding military service in Romania was in fact a crime. Both issues were eventually solved. When a local Volksdeutsche leader, Gauleiter Fromm, came to Hans...
Soviets. This was particularly important regarding the issue of mindset. During the interwar period, Romania’s closest ally had been France. Naturally, such a relationship had a military component. Romanian officers attended French schools, and, institutionally, the Romanian army was greatly influenced by French doctrine and thinking. If it proved difficult to get more senior Romanian officers to abandon what the Germans saw as the overly “schematic” and methodical French approach to combat operations, the younger officers, in contrast, proved more receptive to German concepts and doctrine.

A major problem faced by the DHM involved the lack of interpreters. To be sure, the mastery of a foreign language was a requirement for graduation from the Kriegssakademie. The vast majority of German officers who studied a foreign language generally gravitated toward French or English. In 1932, for example, a language examination was administered by Wehrkreis (Military District) III in Berlin. Some 178 officers took examinations, the great majority of which were in French or English. Only 34 took the examination in Russian, and no one took it in Romanian. Examinations administered by the Luftwaffe showed a somewhat wider variation, but again Romanian was well down on the list.

Consequently, the German divisions with the DHM had relatively few interpreters available to provide instruction and training to the Romanians. The 16th Panzer Division, for example, had only two interpreters on its staff, a wholly inadequate number given the tasks set for the unit. The Romanians did not have the resources to make up the shortfall. They were able to provide only one interpreter to the German 170th Infantry Division.

Another major problem the Germans saw in trying to train the Romanian army was the lack of a professional noncommissioned officer (NCO) corps able to carry out its responsibilities. In the German army, the day-to-day conduct of training and, indeed, the daily running of the army at the lowest levels were often left to its NCOs and junior officers. In the Romanian army, however, such positions were not held in the same degree of esteem. In the eyes of DHM liaison officers, too many Romanian NCOs looked upon their positions as chances for personal monetary gain.

The final problem faced by the DHM in conducting its activities was lack of standardization in the Romanian army. Like many of the armies in that part of the world, Romania did not have an armaments industry sufficient to equip the army by itself. To make up the difference, the army made all manner of weapons purchases. The result was that by the time the German military mission arrived in Romania, the Romanian army was using a bewildering variety of weapons including Czech, Russian, French, and Austrian rifles; French, Russian, and Czech machineguns; and German, French, Italian, Russian, Czech, Romanian, and Austrian artillery pieces, all of varying calibers. Although the Romanian army tried to mitigate this situation by minimizing the number of different weapons allocated to specific divisions, the lack of standardization made training difficult.

**The Test of Combat**

The ultimate outcome of DHM activities was the record of the Romanian army in combat. In this regard, the Romanian record was mixed. Broadly put, Romanian participation in Barbarossa could be divided into two
phases. The first phase extended from the start of the invasion on June 22, 1941, up through the first week of July. During this time, the Romanian army was tasked by Hitler to defend the Pruth River and then gain some bridgeheads across it. The army would also defend the Romanian oil-producing areas and the Black Sea port of Constanța. The second phase of the Romanian army’s part in the invasion would begin with the crossing of the Dniester River once Army Group South penetrated the Soviet defenses to the north. Ultimately, the army would advance across the Dniester and Bug Rivers into what would become Transnistria, and the Romanians would eventually besiege and finally occupy the port of Odessa on October 16, 1941.29

Since the main Romanian effort was to be made by General Petre Dumitrescu’s Romanian Third Army, Romanian headquarters concentrated the majority of divisions that had German training under Dumitrescu’s command. In addition, the German-trained divisions enjoyed a greater degree of standardization in terms of weapons and equipment. For the basic small arm, for example, these divisions used the Czech 7.92mm rifle, which could take German ammunition. Reserve units would have to make do with the previously noted plethora of Russian-, Austrian-, and French-made weapons.30

In the first phase of the campaign, Romanian performance might be regarded as satisfactory. The army was able to accomplish its task even though, in a number of places, the Romanians’ Soviet opponents were often better armed and equipped. Even Colonel General Franz Halder, the chief of the German Army General Staff and no particular admirer of Romanian military prowess, confessed pleasant surprise at the initial performance of the Romanians. The liaison staff with the Romanian 1st Border Division thought well enough of the division’s conduct to submit the names of some 37 members for German military awards.31

Things were much tougher in the second phase of the 1941 campaign. The Romanian Third and Fourth Armies were now required to undertake missions well beyond their normal operational radius. That often left them requiring logistical support from the Germans, who were not always in a position to deliver it when needed. Dumitrescu’s Third Army narrowly avoided a deadly clash with the Hungarian Mobile Corps, which was also operating on that part of the front, thanks to the efforts of German liaison officers with both formations.32

The siege of Odessa proved long and costly to the Romanians. The Soviet High Command was able to keep the independent Coastal Army, garrisoning Odessa, supplied by sea. That allowed the garrison to conduct an active and energetic defense. Several successful Soviet sorties forced the Fourth Army to fight repeatedly over the same ground in bloody assaults. It was only after the Romanians secured key points in the fortress’s defense system, combined with the threat of intervention by German airpower on a massive scale, that the Soviets evacuated the city on October 15, 1941. Odessa’s occupation marked a clear end of the campaign for what was by that time an exhausted Romanian army.33

Takeaways for Today

So what can be drawn from the experiences of the German army mission to Romania that would be of use to today’s military professional? The first takeaway concerns the size and composition of liaison staffs. The German effort in this regard was consistently hindered by the fact that liaison staffs were small. An army-level liaison staff, headed by a general officer, usually did not exceed 18 members, while a corps-level staff, normally led by a colonel, would be no more than 10. Division and brigade staffs were tiny, consisting of no more than an officer, a major or even a captain, plus an interpreter and a driver. This made it difficult for liaison officers to be absent from their units for any length of time, whether for official or personal business.34 In addition, it did not take into account the fact that liaison officers, like other human beings, were subject to problems such as sickness or sheer exhaustion. The difficulties associated with the small size of German liaison staffs mirror the complaints of many involved with Mobile Training Team efforts in Iraq during the 2005–2008 timeframe and more recently in Afghanistan.35

The structure of liaison teams is also an issue. Some current critics, such as T.X. Hammes, suggest that the Army replace field-grade officers on staffs with skilled and professional NCOs. This would allow company-grade officers to spend more time at the company level, and reduce the number of field-grade officers. At the same time, he calls for the creation of larger advisory teams to work with allies against fourth-generation warfare opponents.36

While Hammes’s call for larger advisory teams is correct, the German experience detailed above suggests that more officers, not fewer, are needed, especially when it comes to working with foreign partners. Hammes, like his German counterparts in the DHM, comes from a military culture that values the NCO. Such was not the case in Romania. German reports consistently noted that capable Romanian NCOs were rare. Too often, Romanian NCOs were corrupt and abusive. On the other hand, it does seem clear that Romanian officers regarded NCOs as not much more than privates who had a bit more rank.37 Getting a military culture to create a professional NCO corps where one has not existed previously involves a profound change in mindset, a process that would require great investments of time and patience. This was true in Romania in 1940 and it is just as true today.

Rank also becomes an issue here. As noted previously, both the German military culture of World War II and contemporary American military culture value the judgment as well as the independence of NCOs and relatively junior officers. In other cultures, this is not the case. In Germany, sending rela-
tively lower-ranking officers to units as liaison officers was at times regarded as an insult by the commanders of those units, who believed that their status demanded that they deal with a liaison officer of higher rank.38 This is still true today, and using short-term expedients such as flocking NCOs with field-grade ranks and sending them out as liaison officers, as we did in the Gulf War, will simply not do.

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A third takeaway concerns language. As noted previously, German officers who were attendees of the Kriegsakademie were required to study a foreign language. The vast majority of them, however, took French or English, as the foreign languages they were most familiar with and had probably already some knowledge of from their days as students in the German educational system. French and English were also, as the biographer of one of Germany’s most successful field commanders noted, the languages of Germany’s two most likely enemies. This had been also the case for an extended time.39

Not much thought, however, had apparently been given to training people in the languages of those countries that might be allies. Thus, while cultural and historical factors alleviated a need for the Germans to have interpreters when dealing with the Finns and Hungarians, the Romanians and Italians were another story.40 Consequently, Germany, especially the army, found itself consistently short of Romanian and Italian interpreters. Complaining that the allies were not doing their parts, as the Germans did in regard to the Romanians, although gratifying emotionally, was not a solution to the problem.41

Solving the problem of language, especially the more difficult ones, again requires a long-term attempt at a solution, while understanding that the problem may remain insoluble. Providing language instruction to field-grade officers at intermediate-level professional military education institutions, as the U.S. military has been doing over the past few years, frankly yields too little return for the size of the investment made. A longer term solution would be to improve the type of education in language afforded students in the education system generally, but this is too problematic to ensure the desired outcome. In short, the issue of language will most likely continue to impact our efforts in a negative sense, and it will not yield to the type of quick fix so desired by both American military culture and the broader society it represents.

The experience of the German military mission to Romania holds a good many lessons useful for today’s military professional. Like so many other events from history, when placed in the context of contemporary events, the story of the German mission once again shows the wisdom of William Shakespeare’s words carved outside of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., “What Is Past Is Prologue.”

NOTES


2. DGFP, vol. X, nos. 51, 56, 80, and 171, 52–53, 58, 91, and 218–219, respectively.

3. Romania was awarded Transylvania as part of the Treaty of Trianon in 1919. Prior to that, Transylvania was part of the dual monarchy of Austria-Hungary.

4. DGFP, vol. X, no. 413, 583. The First Vienna Award was allocated on November 2, 1938, when Hungary was given a piece of the rump Slovak state that had survived the Munich agreement. See Gerhard L. Weinberg, The Foreign Policy of Hitler’s Germany, vol. 2 (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 472.


15. DGFP, vol. XI, nos. 9, 652 and 691, 11, 1090–1091 and 1169, respectively; and Förster, 339.


17. OKW, “Instructions for the Behavior of German Soldiers in Romania,” January 11, 1941, NARA T-501/281/000230; Förster, 338; and DHM, “Build-Up and Action of the Romanian Army.” See, for example, the Banater Deutsche Zeitung, December 14, 1940, NARA T-315/680/000045.


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In the strategic level, there is intense, but quiet politics—shifting balance of power, and history. At the rise of China, the Japan relationship: shaping the China-Sea, and security anxieties in both countries. Nevertheless, the Japan-China relationship is also very from its “lost decade” in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the Japan-China relationship is also marked by a number of combustible political issues including conflicting territorial claims, a disputed maritime boundary in the East China Sea, and security anxieties in both countries. Moreover, highly nationalistic, zero-sum issues relating to sovereignty, such as the September 2010 Senkaku incident, have the potential to derail the relationship at significant cost to both nations. These issues must be managed with care if Sino-Japanese relations are to reach their full potential.


22 Adolph Hitler’s initial military directive made it quite clear that the invasion of the Soviet Union would involve Romanian participation. DGFP, vol. XI, no. 532, 900.


27 OKH, Foreign Armies East, Taschenbuch Räumliches Heer, February 1940, NARA T-501/281/000004; and German Liaison Staff with the Romanian I Mountain Corps and the Romanian 4th Mountain Brigade to the Chief of the General Staff of the DHM, April 23, 1941, NARA T-501/275/000284.

28 DGFP, vol. XII, nos. 614 and 644, 1004–1005 and 1048, respectively.

29 DGFP, vol. XI, no. 532, 901; Friedrich Forstmeier, Odessa 1941: Der Kampf um Stadt und Hafen und der Räumung der Seefestung 15 August bis 16 Oktober 1941 (Freiburg: Verlag Rombach, 1967), 18; and DiNardo, 112.


32 “Inspection Report of Major (General Staff) Stephanus of 25 and 26 July 1941 to German XXX and XI Corps, Romanian Third Army,” July 26, 1941, NARA T-312/359/7933496; Romanian Third Army to German Eleventh Army Quartemaster, “Memo on Supply of Romanian Third Army East of the Bug River,” August 21, 1941, NARA T-312/354/7927680; and “Dumitrescu to German Eleventh Army,” August 15, 1941, NARA T-312/360/7934785.


34 DiNardo, 105; and “Second German Liaison Command to Subordinate Liaison Commands, Official Operation of German Liaison Commands,” July 30, 1941, NARA T-501/280/000971.

35 This is an observation made to the author by one of his students, an Army major with considerable experience in this duty.


38 An excellent example of this comes from the German experience working with the Italians in North Africa. See German Liaison Officer to Italian Fifth Air Fleet, “Report of Liaison Officer to Italian Fifth Air Fleet in North Africa to Commanding General of German X Air Corps,” May 19, 1941, BA-MA RL 2 II/38; and DiNardo, 62.


40 Germany was taught as a second language in the Finnish school system from early on, while all officers who graduated from the Hungarian General Staff College had to know German since about half of the school library books were in German. DiNardo, 108; and telephone interview with Bela Kiraly, December 20, 1993. Kiraly was a Hungarian officer who served on the eastern front in World War II and one of my professors in graduate school.

41 DiNardo, 100; and German 10th Liaison Command, “Annex to War Diary of German 10th Liaison Command, Experiences,” September 17, 1942, NARA T-501/282/000184.