

# ARTICLES

## THE ROMANIANS OF THE TIMOK VALLEY IN THE DEBATES OF THE COMMISSION FOR THE FRONTIERS OF ROMANIA AND YUGOSLAVIA, PARIS PEACE CONFERENCE, 1919

*George Damian Mocanu*<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

*Among many other problems remained unsolved after the Paris Peace Conference in 1919 there is the issue of the Romanians living in north-eastern Serbia, specifically between the valleys of the rivers Morava and Timok. A large population numbered in hundreds of thousands received very little attention during the conference that aimed at solving the ethnical problems of Europe. The ambiguous result of the Paris Peace Conference regarding the Romanians of the Timok Valley had dire consequences on long term for this population, hence the origins of this situation deserve a closer evaluation.*

**Keywords:** Romanians of the Timok Valley, Paris Peace Conference 1919, national minorities rights.

### INTRODUCTION

This article aims to show how the issue of the Romanians in the Timok Valley was dealt with at the Paris Peace Conference in 1919. At the end of the First World War in the four counties of the north-eastern Serbia (Craina, Pojarevaţ, Timok and Morava) there were about 300,000 ethnic Romanians according to estimates from Bucharest (120,000 according to Serbian statistics)<sup>2</sup>. The fate and national rights of this population were discussed at the Paris Peace Conference without reaching a conclusion that would provide guarantees for the preservation of national identity. I will try in the following lines to present how this situation was reached at the Paris Peace Conference and what were the causes of this development.

The decisions on Romania's borders were taken at the Paris Peace Conference in the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia, which included

---

<sup>1</sup> Researcher at the European Centre for Ethnic Studies, E-mail contact: george.damian@gmail.com

<sup>2</sup> Atanasie Popovici, "Memoriul românilor din Serbia" [Memorandum of Romanians of Serbia], in C. Constante and A. Golopenţia, „Românii din Timoc” [Romanians of Timoc], Bucharest, 1943.

representatives of the Great Powers (the United States, Great Britain, France, and Italy). The minutes of this commission<sup>3</sup> are the main source of information for this article, together with the memoranda submitted by the Romanians of the Timok Valley, the Romanian representatives and the memoirs of some of the participants in the negotiations.

### **THE ROMANIANS OF THE TIMOK VALLEY IN THE ATTENTION OF SCIENTISTS BEFORE THE FIRST WORLD WAR**

Before the First World War, the issue of the Romanians in the Timok Valley received little attention in political and scientific circles in Bucharest. Ethnographic, historical and sociological research in this community started relatively late compared to other Romanian communities in other states, and the problems faced by the Romanians of the Timok Valley did not find a place in the Romanian public agenda in the second half of the 19th century and at the beginning of the 20th century.

The scientific research on Romanians of Timok started at the beginning of the 19th century, when the Serbian folklorist Vuk Karadic collected Romanian folk songs from the area in 1811–1813 when he was a customs officer in Cladovo, the manuscript reaching Gheorghe Asachi in 1823, unfortunately lost in the fire of the National Library in Iași. Beginning with 1859 the ethnographer F. Kanitz carried out several field surveys in the Timok Valley, followed by Gustav Weigand who carried out linguistic studies at the end of the 19th century, but was also interested in cultural and political issues. The Serbian ethnographer Tihomir Georgevič published an extensive work in 1905 on the Romanians of Timok under the title “Among our Romanians”. Romanian research on the Romanians of the Timok Valley began relatively late, after 1900, with the geographer George Vâlsan and the linguist George Giulea who published a collection of traditional texts from the region in 1913<sup>4</sup>.

The Romanians of Timok really came to the attention of the public in Bucharest in 1906, when on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of the reign of King Carol I, at the exhibition organized in his honor, there was a section containing ethnographic material brought from the Romanians of the Timok Valley by C. Constante. The exhibition in Bucharest was also attended by Romanians from the Timok Valley, one of the consequences of which was that the inhabitants of the region asked in a memorandum to receive the same support from the Romanian authorities as the Romanians of Albania and Macedonia. The author of this

---

<sup>3</sup> National Archives of the United States, General Records of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace 1918–1931, Roll 170, Committees and Commissions Rumanian and Yugoslav Affairs, M820 Roll 170 (hereafter National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170).

<sup>4</sup> Annemarie Sorescu Marinkovic, „Cultura populară a românilor din Timoc – încercare de periodizare a cercetărilor etnologice” [Popular culture of the Romanians of Timok – an attempt to periodize ethnological research], in *Philologica Jassyenia*, 2006, pp. 73–92.

memorandum was the agronomist Miloslav Bogdanovič from Petrovats, who returned with a new memo to the Bucharest authorities in 1911, without receiving a reply<sup>5</sup>. The problems of the Romanians in Timok were brought to the attention of the public opinion in Bucharest in 1912 by Atanasie Popovici, a native of this area, who since 1909 had joined the entourage of professors Onisifor Ghibu, Vasile Pârvan and Nicolae Iorga. On 18 December 1912, the latter presented a memorandum drafted by Atanasie Popovici in the Romanian Parliament, requesting cultural support from the Romanian state for the Romanians of the Timok Valley. The memorandum was accompanied by several articles published in Bucharest newspapers describing the difficult situation of the Romanians of Timok.

### ION I.C. BRĂTIANU'S MEMORANDUM

The issue of the Romanians in the Timok Valley was raised at the Paris Peace Conference by Prime Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu in a memorandum presented after the debate on the Banat issue on 31 January 1919 to US President Wilson, British Prime Minister Lloyd, French President Clemenceau and Italian Prime Minister Orlando. In the memorandum in which Brătianu detailed Romania's position and arguments regarding the full attribution of Banat, there is a brief reference to the Romanians of the Timok Valley:

“The Roumanian Government has always been so persuaded of the Danube's importance as a peace-maintaining frontier, that it has never cast its eyes beyond this river, nor considered the possibility of uniting to that part of Roumania watered by the Northern Danube the many Roumanians settled in Serbia between the Timok and the Morava valleys.

It is persuaded that once the Danube is crossed, once a bridgehead is established on the further bank, yet wider territorial extensions in this direction will become of ever-increasing political and economic urgency. There would then be no end to the unappeasable disputes connected with more or less conventional frontiers. And these disputes, which Roumania has steadfastly refused to tolerate on the right bank of the Danube, could not fail to arise on its left bank with regard to a frontier line drawn across the plain of the Banat, for no nice adjustment could make it anything but ill-defined and inequitable.

Thus, the only results of allowing Serbia to cross the Danube in order to ensure that State a supposed ethnographical boundary, in the hope of finding in such concessions a guarantee for the organisation of international peace, would be economic disorganisation, arrested development of a whole region, and the certainty of future disputes.

It is hardly necessary to add that Roumania will ensure to all Serbs who may remain within her territory all the rights and guarantees ensured to Roumanian subjects by the

---

<sup>5</sup> Teodor Arhire, „Românii timoceni la începutul secolului XX” [Romanians of Timok at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century], *Steaua Dobrogei*, no. 12/2010, pp. 13–16.

Serbian State, in conformity with the principles which may be laid down by the League of Nations in the case of minorities”<sup>6</sup>.

From the very beginning, the issue of the Romanians of Timok was used by Romania as an argument in favour of granting the whole province of Banat: the Serbs who remained in Banat under Romanian rule were considered as an exchange for the Romanians of the Timok Valley who remained under Serbian rule. Brătianu stressed that Romania did not want to receive territories south of the Danube to which it would be entitled on the basis of the ethnic principle by the presence of a large Romanian population in the Timok Valley. This stance of Romania towards the Romanians of Timok was to influence all the rest of the negotiations held in relation to them at the Paris Peace Conference.

### **ROMANIANS IN THE TIMOK VALLEY AND THE COMMISSION FOR THE FRONTIERS OF ROMANIA AND YUGOSLAVIA**

The first reference to the Romanians of the Timok Valley in the discussions of the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia was made on 22 February 1919 during the discussion with the Romanian Prime Minister Ion I.C. Brătianu<sup>7</sup>. The Commission wanted to find out the arguments on the basis of which Romania was claiming the whole province of Banat, over which Serbia was also making claims. Brătianu’s arguments focused on the economic unity of Banat and the need to preserve this economic coherence, but he referred to the ethnic problems in the area in the following form according to the meeting’s minutes:

“He next refutes the various ethnographic, political and religious arguments advanced by the Serbian representatives in support of their claims. Serbia demands her countrymen of the Banat, but will she not thus provoke an irredentist movement among the Romanian subjects of the Timok? The Romanian Government which has always discouraged the Timok people has just received a memorandum from them”.

The issue of the Romanians in the Timok Valley returned to the attention of the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia on 11 March 1919<sup>8</sup>, when the British representative Sir Eyre Crowe proposed the inclusion of a paragraph on this region in the Commission’s final report:

“The Romanian Delegation has drawn the attention of the Commission to the situation of the Romanian population that live in large numbers in the north-eastern part of Serbia, and who, according to different estimates, total 300.000 people (Romanian estimate) or 130.000 (Serbian statistics). Though doing full justice to the interest of

---

<sup>6</sup> \*\*\*, “Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919”, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1943, volume III, doc. 56, p. 833.

<sup>7</sup> National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170, Minutes of 22 February 1919.

<sup>8</sup> National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170, Minutes of 11 March 1919.

the Romanians in the fate of their brothers by race, now under the Serb administration, the Commission cannot believe that its jurisdiction extends so far as to intervene in the internal affairs of an Allied country, whose territorial rights are not questioned. However, it wishes to express its confidence and hope that the Serb Government will assure the Romanian population the same rights as those enjoyed by Serbs under the Romanian administration”.

The representative of France Mr. Laroche questioned the timing of the British representative’s introduction of this paragraph, pointing out that the Romanian Prime Minister referred to the Romanians in the Timok Valley only as a counter-argument to Serbia’s claims on Banat. According to the French representative, the Romanians in the Timok Valley enjoyed the same rights as any other Serbian citizen – Sir Eyre Crowe’s reply was that his proposal merely expressed the hope that the situation of the Romanians in the Timok Valley would be improved. The British position was supported by the US representative Dr. Clive Day, the second British representative Alan Leeper also stressed that Romanians in the Timok Valley do not enjoy the best treatment from the Serbian authorities. French representative Mr. Laroche conceded, saying that since the British delegation had information on the situation in the area it could only support a measure aimed at protecting the rights of national minorities. This view was also shared by the Italian representative, so that the insertion of the paragraph on Romanians of the Timok Valley in the Commission’s final report was approved.

The Commission discussed the Romanians in the Timok Valley once again on 18 March 1919 - this time on the right bank of the Timok River, when the question of the border between Yugoslavia and Bulgaria was raised<sup>9</sup>. Regarding the Vidin region the Drafting Committee pointed out that:

- a) The Committee recognizes that the attribution to an Allied State of the Bulgarian territory comprised in the angle formed by the Timok and the Danube would facilitate the establishment of direct relations between Romania and Serbia by permitting the construction of a railway from Zajecar to Vidin which would be connected at the latter place with the Craiova-Bucharest railway.
- b) It notes, nevertheless, that this district connection can be realized further north by the construction of a Romanian railway connected with the Serbian railway which follows the valley of the Timok.
- c) It considers that as the district of Vidin contains important elements of Romanian population, its attribution either to Serbia or Romania is not desirable, as being likely to raise the question of the Romanians of Timok.
- d) It decides in consequence that it is not advisable to modify the existing frontier in this district.

This approach was promoted by the French General Le Rond who wanted to create a direct rail link between Craiova and Thessaloniki, with the idea of connecting transport between the allied states supported by France (Yugoslavia, Romania and Greece). The question of the Romanians on the right bank of the river

---

<sup>9</sup> National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170, Minutes of 18 March 1919.

Timok (Bulgaria) was discussed again at the Commission meeting of 20 May 1919, when the British representative Sir Eyre Crowe repeated the argument that the Romanians in Bulgarian Timok could not be ceded to Romania without creating problems with the Romanians in Serbian Timok<sup>10</sup>. Also, Bulgarian Timok could not be ceded to Yugoslavia even in part without stirring up new protests from Romania.

The issue of the Romanians in the Timok Valley was given the following form in the Final Report of the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia<sup>11</sup>:

“VI. Question of the Romanians of the Timok Valley

The attention of the Commission has been directed by the Romanian Delegation to the position of the large Romanian population inhabiting the North-Eastern corner of Serbia and variously stated as numbering 300,000 (Romanian estimate) and 120,000 (Serbian statistics). While appreciating the interests taken by the Romanians in the fortunes of their co-racials under the Yugoslav administration, the Commission cannot admit that its competence extends to interference in the internal affairs of an allied country whose territorial rights are not contested; but it expresses the confident hope that the Government of Yugoslavia will assure to the Romanian population the same rights as those which will be enjoyed by the Yugoslavs under Romanian rule”.

### **LAST HOPE: LEAGUE OF NATIONS**

The above paragraph contains the essence of the debates in the Commission on the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia: the Paris Peace Conference could not decide on the frontiers of an Allied State recognised as such before the outbreak of war. The fate of the Romanians in the Timok Valley was initially left to the good relations between Romania and Yugoslavia by the last sentence expressing the hope that the Romanians in the Timok Valley would enjoy the same rights as the Serbs in Romania.

In the long run, the hope for the respect of the rights of the Romanian minority in Yugoslavia was to use the provisions of the Treaty on Minorities, which was drawn up by the Commission on New States established on 1 May 1919. Despite the opposition of the Eastern European states, which considered that accepting a treaty that would check domestic policy measures was a violation of national sovereignty, treaties were eventually signed that placed the protection of national minorities under the guarantee of the League of Nations (Poland 28 June 1919, Czechoslovakia 10 September 1919, Yugoslavia 10 September 1919, Romania 9 December 1919, Greece 10 August 1920). The rights of national minorities guaranteed by these treaties were the following: free exercise of religion, equality before the law, free use of mother tongue, right to establish their own organisations, state education in

---

<sup>10</sup> National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170, Minutes of 20 May 1919.

<sup>11</sup> National Archives of the United States, M820 Roll 170.

mother tongue in areas inhabited by a majority minority<sup>12</sup>. The protection of Romanians in the Timok Valley under the auspices of the League of Nations was a failure in the interwar period, ethnic assimilation started before the First World War continued through the school and the church, the Romanian-Serbian bilateral treaties referring to the situation of national minorities were endlessly negotiated and without practical effect<sup>13</sup>.

### THE ROUTE OF AN ABANDONMENT

The decision-making mechanism of the 1919 Paris Peace Conference was one in which the views of the affected states – whether allies or enemies - were unlikely to be taken into account. The principles set out by US President Woodrow Wilson proved far too generous to be easily put into practice. The decisions of the Council of Four (US President Wilson, British Prime Minister Lloyd, French President Clemenceau, and Italian Prime Minister Orlando) were considered by special committees proposing practical solutions. In turn, the members of these committees based their work on a series of historical, geographical, demographic, and economic studies carried out before the end of the war, at least in the case of US and British diplomats<sup>14</sup>. The work of the commissions was secret, representatives of the affected states could be invited to express their views, but they did not have access to the documentation and work of the commissions. Another level of discussion was informal: the British and American representatives coordinated their actions in the committees discreetly and supported each other<sup>15</sup>.

The issue of Romanians in the Timok Valley does not appear in the preliminary studies to the Paris Peace Conference by American and British experts – for Washington and London diplomats the appearance of this Romanian population in Serbia during the negotiations was a surprise. While the problems of the Romanians of Transylvania and Bessarabia were known internationally and there was a large bibliography dedicated to them, including in languages of international circulation, regardless of the orientation of the studies, in the case of the Romanians of the Timok

---

<sup>12</sup> Helmer Rosting, “Protection of Minorities by the League of Nations”, *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Oct. 1923), pp. 641–660.

<sup>13</sup> Teodor Dan Arhire, *Românii timoceni în prima jumătate a secolului XX [Romanians of Timok in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century]*, Centre for Studies on Romanian Resources, Bucharest, 2008.

<sup>14</sup> See

1. Constantin Ardeleanu, “Bessarabia at the End of World War I – The Handbook of the Historical Department, Foreign Office (1919)”, *The Annals of the Lower Danube University of Galati, History*, no 9/2010, pp. 91–117;

2. Constantin Ardeleanu, “Transylvania and The Banat At The End Of World War I – The Handbook Of The Historical Department, The Foreign Office (1919)”, *The Annals of the Lower Danube University of Galati, History*, no 10/2011, pp. 55–99;

3. Lawrence E. Gelfand, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963.

<sup>15</sup> Harold Nicolson, *Peacemaking 1919*, London, 1933.

Valley studies were just beginning to appear, and this in Bucharest itself, where there should have been a much greater interest in their compatriots south of the Danube.

This lack of information was compensated by a memorandum published in Paris by Atanasie Popovici in French in which a historical, geographical and demographic portrait of the Romanians of the Timok Valley was sketched. In response, Belgrade launched a counter-memorandum by Tihomir Georgevič “The Truth about Romanians in Serbia” which supported the thesis of Romanian immigration south of the Danube and the fact that studies on the Romanians in the Timok Valley had been started by Austrian researchers whose aim was to break the Serbian-Romanian friendship<sup>16</sup>. The memoranda mentioned here did not achieve their objectives, they were not taken into account in the discussions of the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia, where the representatives of the Great Powers preferred to rely on the studies carried out by the experts of their own diplomatic corps.

Another issue that marked the fate of Romanians from the Timok Valley at the Paris Peace Conference was the attitude of the Romanian representatives. Ion I.C. Brătianu’s interventions were limited to proposing that the Romanians of the Timok Valley be considered an exchange with the Serbs of the entire province of Banat. Brătianu’s main objective was to obtain the whole of Banat, but at the same time he tried to avoid antagonising Belgrade too much – in the end he did not succeed in obtaining the whole of Banat, and the fate of the Romanians in the Timok Valley remained with no international guarantees.

The Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia has thus limited itself to inserting a paragraph in the final report on the frontiers of Yugoslavia which does no more than recommend a regime of reciprocity between Romania and Yugoslavia with regard to the rights granted to national minorities. This paragraph was not included in the final text of the treaties drawn up on the basis of the recommendations made by the Commission for the Frontiers of Romania and Yugoslavia. The main reluctance of the Great Powers to suggest a solution for the Romanians in the Timok Valley (beyond the fact that Romania's representatives did not make any clear demands) was based on the idea that the borders of an allied state, which had been established before the outbreak of the First World War, could not be discussed.

## REFERENCES

- \*\*\*, “Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, The Paris Peace Conference, 1919”, United States Government Printing Office, Washington, 1943, volume III.

---

<sup>16</sup> V. C. Constante and Anton Golopenția, *op. cit.*



- 
- Ardeleanu Constantin, “Bessarabia at the End of World War I – The Handbook of the Historical Department, Foreign Office (1919)”, *The Annals of the Lower Danube University of Galati, History*, no 9/2010.
- Ardeleanu Constantin, “Transylvania And The Banat At The End Of World War I – The Handbook Of The Historical Department, The Foreign Office (1919)”, *The Annals of the Lower Danube University of Galati, History*, no 10/2011.
- Arhire Teodor Dan, *Românii timoceni în prima jumătate a secolului XX [Romanians of Timok in the first half of the 20th century]*, Centre for Studies on Romanian Resources, Bucharest, 2008.
- Arhire Teodor Dan, “Românii timoceni la începutul secolului XX” [Romanians of Timok at the beginning of the 20th century], *Steaua Dobrogei*, no. 12, 2010.
- Constante C. and Golopenția A., *Românii din Timoc [Romanians of Timoc]*, Bucharest, 1943.
- Gelfand E. Lawrence, *The Inquiry: American Preparations for Peace, 1917–1919*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1963.
- Marinkovic Annemarie Sorescu, “Cultura populară a românilor din Timoc – încercare de periodizare a cercetărilor etnologice” [Popular culture of the Romanians of Timok – an attempt to periodize ethnological research], in *Philologica Jassyenia*, 2006.
- National Archives of the United States, General Records of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace 1918–1931, Roll 170, Committees and Commissions Rumanian and Yugoslav Affairs, M820 Roll 170.
- Nicolson Harold, *Peacemaking 1919*, London, 1933.
- Rosting Helmer, “Protection of Minorities by the League of Nations”, in *The American Journal of International Law*, vol. 17, no. 4 (Oct. 1923).

