

Book Review: British Clandestine Activities in Romania During the Second World War by Dennis Deletant

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In British Clandestine Activities in Romania During the Second World War, Dennis Deletant attends to the relationship between Britain and Romania preceding and during World War II. The book illustrates the international context of the period, while outlining the cultural and diplomatic relations between these two countries. This is a necessary and valuable contribution to the history of Romania that should serve to inspire further scholarly interest in this part of Europe, writes Vlad Onaciu.

***British Clandestine Activities in Romania During the Second World War.* Dennis Deletant. Palgrave. 2016.**

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On 1 June 1946, the firing squad took aim and, at the order of their commanding officer, pulled the triggers of their rifles. Thus ended the life of Romania's wartime dictator, Marshal Ion Antonescu. His figure was, and will likely remain, a controversial one. Very little has been written about him in Western scholarship, and most of what has been written in Romania has been subject to debate and nationalistic arguments. Professor Dennis Deletant's recent efforts at clarifying Romania's place in the history of the Second World War have therefore been invaluable not only for Romanian scholarship, but for wider European historiography.



Deletant's academic career spans the course of almost five decades. During these years he has been a prolific writer of Romanian history, with books such as *Ceausescu and the Securitate* (1996), *Romania under Communist Rule* (1998) and *Communist Terror in Romania* (1999) adding much to understandings of Romania's communist past. In recent years, his focus has shifted to an even murkier subject: the wartime situation of Romania. In 2006 he published a book entitled *Hitler's Forgotten Ally: Ion Antonescu and His Regime*, an attempt at an impartial biography of the dictator so as to clarify the many paradoxes surrounding him. In 2016, he has continued this in the publication of the book here on review, *British Clandestine Activities in Romania During the Second World War*.

In his latest scholarly undertaking, Deletant clarifies certain issues regarding Romanian and British foreign relations, something which has been long overdue in historiography. This is in part an endeavour borne of his wish to move beyond the traditional paradigm in which Romania was viewed by Britain less as a country than as part of broader phenomena, such as French security and foreign interests in the region (the tentative triple alliance between Poland, Czechoslovakia and Romania) and Soviet hegemonic ambitions (mainly their interest in recovering Bessarabia). He attempts to illustrate and better understand the international context of the period as well as how this determined Romanian leaders to turn from being Allied supporters to becoming part of the Axis. Simultaneously, he gives much attention to British cultural efforts in the period between the wars. Lastly, the book concerns the clandestine operations and sabotage missions planned by the Special Operations Executive (SOE), mostly aimed at crippling oil production from which Germany would have directly benefited.



Image Credit: Ion Antonescu (right) being greeted by Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop during a 1943 visit to Germany ([Bundesarchiv, Bild 183-B23201, CC-BY-SA 3.0](#))

Deletant argues that Romania had always been rather inclined towards the cause of the Allies, owing to their support in 1918 of the creation of Greater Romania (comprising Transylvania, Bukovina, Bessarabia and the Old Kingdom), but that the country was surrounded by revisionist neighbours (especially Hungary, Bulgaria and the Soviet Union). This position changed only when the European order started crumbling after the 1938 Munich Accords, which in a short span led to Romania losing considerable parts of its territory to its aforementioned neighbours. With France and Britain geographically far away, and with the French being knocked out of the war in the summer of 1944, the spectre of Stalin weighed heavily on Romania's political leaders. It was under this context that Romania turned towards Germany for an alliance and some sort of insurance against its Eastern neighbour. Yet, Deletant is not an apologist for Antonescu's regime. He thus argues that while not necessarily the most eager of the Axis Powers, Romania's war effort was on par with that of Italy, making it one of the senior partners in the alliance and a participant in war crimes on the Eastern Front (e.g. the Odessa Massacre).

British and Romanian cultural and diplomatic relations are another issue that concerns Deletant in this book. In his view, these two seem to have been interlinked; by looking at them in detail, one can see beyond the general assumptions. This leads the reader to understand that despite Britain's lack of overall interest in Romania as an individual country, the interwar period saw some efforts being made to create cultural ties through the teaching of English and the introduction of Anglo-Saxon literature in local libraries through various donations. But he argues that these efforts, while impressive, paled in comparison to those of the French and Italians, who went as far as financing university positions through various scholarships. He also pays attention to the ultimate fate of those who had worked for the British, and the efforts made to save them from the clutches of the communists. These men and women came under the scrutiny of the new regime as the Cold War began: they were seen as suspicious, as possible agents of the West and, as Deletant argues, there might also have been a little bit of envy from the Romanian communist leader, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, towards these educated individuals.

However, the major focus of the book is, as the title suggests, British clandestine operations in wartime Romania. Deletant argues that these were focused around two main objectives. Firstly, it was Britain's wish to hit Germany's oil supplies by sabotaging the oil fields, refineries or at least parts of the infrastructure, but this could only be done with the help of the Romanians, who were less than keen on destroying their precious resources and hard-to-obtain

technology. Here, he offers stories of how British agents worked with Romanian allies, with some having a darkly comic aura. This includes the case of Captain Russell who was parachuted into Yugoslavia before moving into Romania, where he was to spread propaganda material in a calculated manner; however, his plans were thwarted by a drunk village mayor who did not respect instructions. Unfortunately, the captain and his partners were forced into hiding and ending up being killed during a mugging by a still-unknown assailant; the operation's money was also stolen.

The other objective was both more pragmatic, but also harder to achieve: knocking Romania out of the war. Given the geographical distance between the two countries, there was only one real way in which this could be done: namely, a *coup d'état* to replace Antonescu's regime. In order to achieve this goal, the British sought an ally in the opposition and National Peasants' Party leader, Iuliu Maniu, the only figure they saw as being capable of leading a possible revolt. The fact is that the relationship between this political figure and the dictator of Romania was somewhat ambivalent. While most dictators seek out to eliminate their opposition, Antonescu tried at first to convince Maniu to join in the formation of the new government but was refused; yet this did not lead to a suppression of the parties as they were left alone, although the Romanian parliament remained suspended. But, as Deletant explains, the British quickly became fed up with Maniu's lack of decisiveness as he was not very keen on turning his country into a war zone, even less so after Germany had enacted Operation Margarethe in Hungary.

Deletant's latest book is yet another much-needed and useful addition to the history of Romania and of East-Central Europe. Going beyond his traditional approach, he introduces elements of international relations that help to tie together the pasts of two European places that are otherwise geographically distanced. This is also long overdue research into understanding Allied attitudes towards what would become the Iron Curtain after the Second World War. Those invested in the study of history can hope that this book will rekindle scholarly interest in the evolution of this part of Europe.

Vlad Onaciu is a PhD student in the Faculty of History and Philosophy at Babes-Bolyai University, where he previously finished his BA and MA in contemporary history. His doctoral research focuses on issues regarding the lives of workers in factories during the communist regime in Romania. His academic interests include the history of communism, oral history, international relations (mainly civilisational studies) and nineteenth- and twentieth-century history in general. [Read more by Vlad Onaciu.](#)

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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