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THE ROLE OF MILITARY IN THE POLITICAL TRANSITION FROM AN INDIGENOUS RULER TO A FOREIGN PRINCE. THE COUP OF FEBRUARY 11, 1866, IN THE ROMANIAN PRINCIPALITIES

Carmen-Sorina RIJNOVEANU (Romania)

On February 11, 1866, the “prince of the union”, as Alexandru Ioan Cuza was called, was dethroned through a palace coup orchestrated by prominent political figures of the time with the direct involvement of a group of officers drawn into the conspiracy. This moment paved the way for a political transition by bringing in a foreign prince from a European royal family. The foreign prince would later become the first king of Romania under the name Carol I Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen.

Undoubtedly, the involvement of the army in this act of dethronement remains one of the most controversial episodes in Romanian history. The action against the ruling prince, to whom the military pledged allegiance, was viewed as treasonous by some and patriotic by others. This reality allows for the raising of some questions around which I will build my research.

What was the role of the army? What was the extent of the military involvement? How were the officers drawn to the plot and how did the action of February 11, 1866, affect the image of the army? Was it treason or a behaviour dictated by patriotic reasons? What was the great powers’ reaction to the coup and can we talk about foreign involvement?

Prince Cuza and the unification of the Romanian Principalities – some considerations

To understand the entirety of the events and actions of February 11, 1866, a brief overview of the general context that defined Cuza's election and reign is necessary, aspects which, implicitly, can explain some of the reasons that motivated the action to remove him from power seven years after his election as ruler.

The starting point is the Crimean War of 1853-1856, during which the two Romanian principalities – Wallachia and Moldavia – were successively occupied by Russian troops (1853), Austrian troops and Ottoman forces in 1854. It had become evident to the great powers of the time that a solution had to be found for the two Romanian principalities, which had become a true battleground for the geopolitical ambitions of the neighbouring empires. France played a central role in this equation, showing a heightened interest in building a protective barrier to stop Russia's advance towards the Balkans and the Straits.⁽¹⁾ France's agenda in supporting the Romanian issue was much more complex, aiming to prevent Russian advancement in the region, weaken the Habsburg Empire, increase French influence at the mouths of the Danube and secure a stable and credibly closely aligned with French policy. Prussia and Sardinia joined France's efforts, driven by their own particular interests: Prussia was interested in further weakening Austria, while Sardinia depended on France's political support to achieve its own national aspirations.

A direct consequence of the Crimean War was the modification of the political status of the two principalities according to the decisions of the Congress of Paris (February 13/25 – March 18/30, 1856). In this regard, the Russian protectorate was abolished and replaced with the collective guarantee of the six Great Powers (France, Great Britain, Russia, Prussia, Austria, Sardinia), while the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte was preserved. Under the new conditions, none of the powers could exert pressure or launch a military intervention without the agreement of all the other guarantor powers. The Principality of Moldavia regained southern Bessarabia, lost in 1812, a measure that pushed Russia away from the mouths of the Danube. The geopolitical implications were evident, as Russian influence was eliminated and the possible advance of Russia into the Balkans was halted.⁽²⁾ The principalities obtained the right to defend themselves with their own national armies and their internal autonomy was recognized.

Regarding the future organization of the Principalities, it was agreed to establish an ad-hoc assembly for each country to express the population's desires. The issue of the unification of the Principalities generated strong reactions from some of the guarantor powers, especially the Ottoman Empire and Austria. The Porte's position was clearly

1. Acad. Dan Berindei (coord.), *Istoria Românilor*, vol VII, tom I, Constituirea României Moderne (1821-1878), Editura Enciclopedică, Bucharest, 2003, p. 430.

2. Apostol Stan, *Protectoratul Rusiei asupra Principatelor Române 1774-1856*, Bucharest, 1995, p. 286.

expressed by the future Grand Vizier Mehmed Fuad Pasha in a discussion with the French ambassador to Constantinople, Édouard de Thouvenel: "The union of the Principalities ultimately results in independence at the end of a year, if not sooner, and signifies the ascent of a foreign prince to the throne and heredity... Others will follow [Serbia]... We will be threatened in the very heart of the empire and the disintegration of Türkiye would begin the next day... while Russia will rule over all of these tiny states out of habit and religion".⁽³⁾ The fear of weakening the Ottoman Empire also defined the ambivalent position that the government in London would adopt, whose strategic interests had been secured through the sultan's commitment to guarantee the neutrality of the Black Sea. The solution was the result of a compromise between France and Great Britain (the Osborne meeting, July 28 / August 9, 1857), namely the administrative union of the Principalities, but the abandonment of the option of uniting under a foreign prince.⁽⁴⁾

The decision of the ad-hoc assemblies in Moldavia and Wallachia was categorical: (1) the union of the two principalities into a single state called Romania under the rule of a foreign hereditary prince from a European dynasty, (2) autonomy and (3) neutrality.⁽⁵⁾ Taking into account the desires expressed by the representatives of the two Principalities, on August 7/19, 1858, the Paris Convention was signed, a treaty that established the new status of the two Romanian countries. The suzerainty of the Porte and the collective guarantee of the six great powers were maintained, with the right to self-administration. The recognized name was the United Principalities of Moldavia and Wallachia, with administrative-political separation, each to be ruled by a prince elected for life by the Elective Assembly. Within this framework, we integrate the extensive national electoral process that led to the election of Alexandru Ioan Cuza as prince. Taking advantage of the fact that the text of the Paris Convention did not specify that the elected princes in the principalities had to be different, the unionist parties decided to elect the same prince, Alexandru Ioan Cuza, in both Moldavia (January 5/17) and Wallachia (January 24 / February 5).⁽⁶⁾ Cuza's double election presented the great powers with a *fait accompli*, which allowed the realization of the first stage of the great national project, through the unification of the two Romanian principalities.

Contesting Cuza

From the beginning of his reign, Alexandru Ioan Cuza supported the implementation of extensive internal reforms that were part of a complex and necessary process of transformation, reform and modernization of the country.⁽⁷⁾ However, Cuza was

3. Acad. Dan Berindei, *op.cit.*, p. 434.

4. Acad. Dan Berindei, *op.cit.* p. 456.

5. Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, Bucharest, Univers Enciclopedic, 2010, pp. 227-229.

6. A. D. Xenopol, *Domnia lui Cuza Vodă*, vol I, Iași, Tipografia Editore "Dacia" P. Iliescu & D. Grosu, 1903, p. 32 *passim*.

7. During his reign, measures were adopted for administrative unification and the organization of modern institutions. The system of measures and weights was modified, replacing it with the metric system, which remains in use today; the

particularly devoted to achieving two key reforms, namely the agrarian reform and the electoral reform, and these were to become the great test of his reign. Both were seen as a direct threat to the power exercised by the large landowners who also wielded political power. In the face of their opposition, on May 2, 1864, Cuza staged a coup d'état to secure extended powers as the only solution to implement the reform program he had committed to. The new electoral law and, particularly, the one regarding the granting of land to peasants, significantly increased the ruler's popularity and ensured strong support from the masses. The situation, however, was different in terms of support from the key political actors of the time.

Cuza's action generated widespread discontent both among the conservatives – who were displeased with the adoption of the agrarian reform – and among the radical liberals, who feared that the ruler would attempt to impose a personal reign. These grievances led to an action of solidarity among the main political forces, conservatives, moderate liberals and radical liberals united in a way that would not have been conceivable under other conditions. The union of their forces became known in history as the “monstrous coalition”. The agenda of this political coalition was centred around three main objectives: removing Cuza, bringing in a foreign prince, and stopping the reform program. The idea of bringing a foreign prince to the country's throne was not new; it had been a central demand of the national project since the revolutions of 1848. There was a widely shared belief among the political elite that this was the only solution that would ensure the stabilization and consolidation of the country and, importantly, would give the country a distinct status on the European stage by closely linking it to the great European dynastic families.⁽⁸⁾ In fact, Cuza himself was a supporter of this solution, as evidenced by a letter he addressed to Emperor Napoleon III on October 1, 1865, in which he expressed his desire to abdicate in favour of bringing in a foreign prince.⁽⁹⁾ The idea was reiterated by Cuza in his address of December 5/7, 1865, when he hinted that he was willing to give up the throne in favour of a foreign prince.⁽¹⁰⁾

On June 5, 1865, a pact was concluded between prominent leaders of the political scene (Ion Brătianu, Dimitrie Ghica, Ioan Ghica, Constantin Rosetti, Gheorghe

modern Penal Code and Civil Code (Napoleonic) were adopted, as well as other legislative acts with a European spirit, which stipulated the equality of citizens before the law. A law for the organization of public education was adopted, making primary education of four grades compulsory, universal, and free. The first universities were established – in Iași in 1860 and in Bucharest in 1864. Trade, crafts, industry, and transportation were organized. Among the most well-known reforms promoted by Prince Cuza are the granting of land ownership to peasants and the abolition of feudal obligations, the electoral law, and the secularization of monastic estates. The name of the prince is also associated with the organization of the Romanian army on modern foundations, the creation of the Defence General Staff, and the development and strengthening of defence capabilities by equipping the army with modern means of combat.

8. See also Radu Rosetti, *Amintiri. Ce am auzit de la alții. Din copilărie. Din prima tinerețe*, Editura Humanitas, Bucharest, 2017, p. 460.

9. Ion Bălăceanu, *Amintiri politice și diplomatice 1848-1903*, Bucharest, Cavallioti, 2002, p. 103; A. D. Xenopol, *Domnia lui Cuza Vodă*, p. 58-59.

10. Liviu Brătescu, *România la răscruce. Anul 1866*, Institutul European, Iași, 2014, p. 75-76.

Știrbei etc.). The purpose of this initiative was to generate a common commitment to implement the decisions of the ad-hoc Divans from 1857, which called for the election of a foreign prince from the ruling families in Europe in the event of a vacant throne.⁽¹¹⁾ The dethronement of Cuza thus became a central objective that united the country's major political forces. The preparation of the action was carried out in the strictest secrecy according to the classic rules of a conspiracy.

The involvement of the army and the preparation of the action

The role and involvement of the army constitute a separate chapter in the overall action aimed at removing the prince. From the very beginning of the preparations, the focus was on attracting some of the officers, whose support was crucial for the plot. Attracting these officers was certainly not an easy task. Most of them were close to the prince; military honour, the oath of loyalty to the prince, respect for him, and the sense of duty were factors that greatly influenced the behaviour of the officers. Moreover, Prince Cuza enjoyed the loyalty and attachment of the troops. Those involved in the plot recognized that neither the population nor the army as a whole wanted the ruler's removal or a revolution. Therefore, it became particularly important to maintain discretion and avoid any opposition within the army that could have exposed the entire plan.

To maintain secrecy, streamline the operation and avoid any support movements within the army, the decision was made to involve the commanders of the Bucharest garrison, particularly those responsible for guarding the Palace and who had easy access to the prince. Their involvement was crucial to successfully executing the operation. The operation was to be conducted in complete secrecy, with only a select group of officers being involved in developing the plan of operation. The meetings between the military commanders were held in complete secrecy. The speed of the operation was also critical – the goal was to surround and get into the palace, isolate the Prince and force him to abdicate as to prevent any potential counter-reaction within the army. The main fear concerned the possible resistance from the troops loyal to the prince Cuza, but also the possible reaction from the population.

The Bucharest garrison consisted of three infantry regiments, one artillery regiment, a rifleman battalion, and an engineering battalion. The positioning of the commanders of these units was particularly important in the overall plan. Two of the infantry regiment commanders, Colonel Crețulescu and Colonel Călinescu, were close to the moderate liberal movement and close friends of Ion Ghica⁽¹²⁾; the commander of the artillery

11. Valeriu Stan, "Două note diplomatice inedite din 1866 ale lui Ion C. Brătianu", *Revista Istorică*, volume IV, No. 1-2 January-February 1993, Bucharest, Editura Academiei, 1993, p. 1123.

12. Ion Ghica (August 12, 1816 - April 22, 1897) was a politician, mathematician, diplomat, personality of Romanian culture, full member and president of the Romanian Academy, and one of the key figures in the 1848 revolution. A member of the moderate liberal organization, later the National Liberal Party. Ghica will hold prominent positions in the state, including three terms as Prime Minister of Romania and numerous ministerial portfolios. After Cuza's

regiment, Colonel Nicolae Haralambie, was in the conservative camp; the leader of the riflemen battalion, Major Dimitrie Lecca, belonged to the radical liberal group. In essence, two regiment commanders, Colonel Solomon and Colonel Brăescu, along with the engineering battalion troops, opposed such an action and remained loyal to the prince.⁽¹³⁾ The involvement of the 2nd and 7th Infantry Regiments, the artillery regiment and the riflemen battalion allowed for the final preparation of the plot.

According to existing testimonies, the first course of action aimed at establishing a connection between the four officers with conflicting political affinities. They were to provide the necessary support for implementing the conspiracy plan, with a particular focus on neutralizing the opposing officers, namely General Florescu, the Chief of the Army General Staff, and Colonel Solomon, who was also the ad-interim Minister of War.⁽¹⁴⁾ The meetings between the military commanders were conducted in complete secrecy. According to the plan, on the night of February 11, the troops stationed in the Bucharest garrison, under the command of the conspirator officers, were tasked with surrounding the palace and isolating the ruler.

On February 10, 1866, at 4 p.m., a meeting took place between the three military leaders of the conspiracy: colonels Nicolae Haralambie, T. Călinescu, and Dumitru Crețulescu. A particularly important element in the operation was the recruitment and involvement of some senior officers from the palace garrison.⁽¹⁵⁾ In this regard, the riflemen battalion led by Major Lecca, a battalion created by the prince and tasked with guarding the palace, played a key role in the execution of the entire operation.⁽¹⁶⁾ Significant support was provided by Colonel Nicolae Zefkari, the commander of the Bucharest garrison, as well as Colonel Dimitrie Kretzulescu, the head of the Bucharest Territorial Division. Captain Candiano-Popescu also played an active role in the operation. According to his own testimony, he was tasked with arresting General Savel Manu, the former Minister of War, and General Ioan Emanoil Florescu, the commander of the army.⁽¹⁷⁾ The commanders who remained loyal to Cuza, taken by surprise, were unable to act, being practically isolated.

Abdication and reactions among the officers

On the night of February 11, 1866, a group of soldiers from the riflemen regiment, led by Captain Costescu, entered the palace, presented the prince with the act of abdication,

abdication (February 11, 1866), Ghica was appointed to form a provisional government, which would administer the country until a foreign prince was installed on the Romanian throne.

13. Ion Bălăceanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 103-104.

14. Ibidem, p. 104.

15. I. G. Valentineanu, *Din memoriile mele (O pagină de istorie modernă). Alegerea, detronarea și înmormântarea lui Cuza Vodă*, Bucharest, Tipografia Modernă Gr. Luis, 1898, p. 105.

16. Constantin C. Giurescu, *Viața și opera lui Cuza Vodă*, ediția a II-a, Bucharest, Editura Științifică, 1970, p. 381.

17. Alexandru Candiano-Popescu, *Amintiri din viața-mi. 1867-1898*, vol. I, Editura Eminescu, Bucharest, 1998, p. 16.

and forced him to sign it at gunpoint.⁽¹⁸⁾ The abdication was signed at 5 a.m. and had the following content: “We, Alexandru Ioan I, in accordance with the will of the nation, today, February 11/23, 1866, relinquish the helm of government into the hands of a Royal Lieutenancy and the ministry elected by the people”.⁽¹⁹⁾ Immediately, a Royal Lieutenancy was established, which included two military officers, Colonel Nicolae Haralambie and General Nicolae Golescu, the third member being Lascăr Catargiu.⁽²⁰⁾

How can the lack of reaction from those not involved in the palace coup be explained? Firstly, the secrecy and speed of the action’s execution practically paralyzed the other forces that could have intervened. The rapid arrest or isolation of loyal unit commanders effectively thwarted any attempt at counter-reaction in support of the prince. Secondly, it was also about the Cuza’s own attitude and the ambivalent signals he sent during the last period of his reign. There was a feeling that Prince Cuza did not want to fight and that he wished to step down to allow the election of a foreign prince. A reaction from loyal soldiers could have triggered a civil war, which Cuza did not want.⁽²¹⁾ There is information suggesting that the prince had been warned that an action was being prepared against him, but his conviction and trust that his troops would protect him led him to ignore the warnings he received.⁽²²⁾ The only measure taken by Cuza was to double the palace guard, without knowing that the guard had already been drawn into the plot.⁽²³⁾

Witnesses to the events later spoke of an attempt at a counter-revolution by loyal officers to free the prince. The attempt failed due to the skilful measures taken by the conspirators: occupying key points, restricting the free movement of soldiers, summoning commanders of major units to the palace, and, in the case of disobedience to the new regime, arresting them. Practically, two of the main military forces of the capital, the 1st Line Regiment commanded by Colonel Alexandru Solomon and the 2nd Lancers Regiment commanded by LTC C. Brăescu, stationed at the Malmaison Barracks in Bucharest, were neutralized. While LTC Brăescu⁽²⁴⁾ was arrested, Colonel Solomon, having been twice ordered by the provisional government not to resist, locked himself and his troops in the barracks, awaiting the decision of the two Chambers. Following their decision to recognize Cuza’s abdication, and also upon the advice of the French consul, H. Tillos, he opened the barracks’ gates and resigned from the army.⁽²⁵⁾

18. The three officers who entered Cuza’s chamber and forced him to sign the abdication were Captains Constantin Pilat, Anton Costescu, and Alexandru Lipoianu.

19. Constantin C. Giurescu, *op. cit.*, p. 386.

20. N. Gane, *Amintiri (1848-1891)*, Craiova, Editura Scrisul Românesc S.A., 1941, pp. 100-101.

21. Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 389.

22. I.G. Valentineanu, *op.cit.*, p. 111.

23. Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 385.

24. Lieutenant Colonel C. Brăescu was urgently summoned to the palace, where the provisional government pressured him to accept the accomplished fact of Cuza’s dethronement. When he refused to comply, he was immediately arrested. See Grigore D. Polizu, *Memoriile unui mort viu*, Bucharest, Editura Do MinoR, 2007, p. 9.

25. Grigore Chiriță, “Armata, detronarea lui Cuza Voda și Carol de Hohenzollern (II)” in *Revista Istorică*, volume 3, no.

On the day of Cuza's arrest, the new authority, the Royal Lieutenancy, instituted precisely to prevent the destabilization of the country and once again present the great powers with a *fait accompli*, proclaimed Prince Philippe of Flanders, son of King Leopold I of Belgium, as prince. However, he declined the proposal. In these circumstances, a broad diplomatic offensive was launched in the major capitals, especially in Paris, to identify a suitable candidate to take the throne. The situation was all the more difficult because the future prince would have to be under the suzerainty of the Sultan, thus ruling a state that did not enjoy independent status. Equally important, the regional power equation was particularly complicated. Both the Ottoman Empire and Austria opposed the idea of a foreign prince. There was a significant risk of Ottoman military intervention against the two Principalities. Cuza's abdication took the great chancelleries by surprise, but the reactions were moderate. France's role was particularly important, and Emperor Napoleon III's reaction was restrained. Moreover, the French emperor had become suspicious of Cuza, fearing that he might be interested in aligning with Russia, an assumption that later proved false. The French emperor's involvement was especially important in securing the agreement of the other powers to the new balance of power in Bucharest. With the support of Emperor Napoleon, the final choice was Prince Carol of Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen, whose family had close ties to both France and the ruling Prussian family. Brought into the country in great secrecy, Carol was proclaimed prince on May 10, 1866, a moment that opened a new chapter in the country's history through the establishment of the constitutional monarchy⁽²⁶⁾, a political regime that lasted until 1947.

The perception of the army's involvement. Did the army fulfil its duty?

Without a doubt, the involvement of a faction of the army was decisive in the success of the entire plan. This is also evident from the fact that two of the three members of the Royal Lieutenancy, which was formed immediately after the prince's abdication, were military – namely, General Nicolae Golescu and Colonel Nicolae Haralambie.

The issue of the army's involvement and the behaviour of some officers have given rise to various interpretations. Was it treason or an action motivated by patriotic feelings? Those who opposed the action argued that the officers involved violated their military oath to the prince, whom they were obliged to serve with loyalty and to protect according to their military pledges. Participation in the coup was, therefore, an act of dishonour and a betrayal of the spirit of military honour.

From the perspective of the patriotic argument, it is argued that the personal interests of the conspiratorial political leaders alone would not have been enough to attract the support of the officers. It was rather a national aspiration. For many, it was not about

11-12, November-December 1992, p. 1123.

26. On May 10, 1881, Prince Carol was proclaimed King of Romania.

Cuza as a person, but about the need to replace the native prince with a foreign one. Romania was surrounded by three absolutist empires, and Europe was dominated by powerful dynasties. Bringing in a foreign prince could connect the young Romanian state with the great ruling families of Europe. It ensured prestige, international support, and stability. Belgium and Greece had proceeded in the same way. There was a strong belief that a constitutional monarchy was the solution for consolidating the national state and unity.⁽²⁷⁾ Thus, some officers saw in Cuza's dethronement the opportunity to realize the aspirations of the ad-hoc assemblies of 1857, which aimed to bring a foreign prince to the throne.⁽²⁸⁾

Such an example is that of Captain Candiano-Popescu, who justified his participation in the act of dethronement through exclusively patriotic reasons: *I joined the conspiracy out of the utmost disinterest and making the greatest sacrifice a man is capable of... How many nights I was sleepless! What agony, what terrible struggle was going on inside of me! I had to make a choice. The nation was my choice!*⁽²⁹⁾ The choice was not an easy one, as evidenced by Captain Candiano-Popescu's testimony, who, although he participated in the conspiracy, refused to go to the Palace to take part directly in the act of abdication: *If I had been asked to do that, I would have flatly refused. It was enough for me to drink the bitter cup of entering into the conspiracy. Even sacrifices have limits!*⁽³⁰⁾

Another possible explanation is related to the dissatisfaction expressed by a number of officers regarding the conduct of prince, the increasing influence of the clique around him, and his growing tendency to consolidate his personal power. There were also reasons of opportunism, with many of the involved officers seeking to secure better career advancement opportunities. The subsequent career of some of those involved confirmed this reality.⁽³¹⁾

Regardless of the possible arguments that can be made, the role of the army in the action of February 11th generated significant divisions and attitudes of rebellion, which severely tested the very cohesion and solidarity within the military body.

Despite efforts, including the intensive use of the party press⁽³²⁾ to justify the participation of the military in the February 11th action, the state of indignation and dissatisfaction among the officers was evident. A large part of the officers openly

27. Alexandru Candiano -Popescu, *op.cit.*, p. 13.

28. Constantin C. Giurescu, *op.cit.*, p. 380.

29. Alexandru Candiano-Popescu, *op.cit.*, p. 14.

30. General Al. Candiano-Popescu, *Amintiri din viața-mi*, vol. I, Editura Universul, Bucharest, 1944, p. 106.

31. Captain Dimitrie Lecca, the commander of the battalion of hunters directly involved in the plot, was appointed Minister of War in the newly formed government; Colonel Nicolae Haralambie became a member of the Royal Lieutenancy; Captain Candiano-Popescu was appointed chief of staff to Colonel Haralambie and later became royal adjutant, etc. Many of the officers involved in the plot were promoted to the rank of general.

32. See "Românul", issue of February 13/25, 1866, p. 1-3.

condemned the involvement of some military personnel in the coup.⁽³³⁾ In protest, many submitted their resignations from the army.⁽³⁴⁾ The risk of indiscipline and division within the military had become a reality that increasingly raised concerns at the political level.

A telling example is that of Colonel Nicolae Haralambie⁽³⁵⁾, subsequently advanced to the rank of general, who had been actively involved in the coup against Cuza. He decided to resign from the army just a few months after the foreign prince was brought in, considering himself a “traitor” by his own admission. The General justified his resignation as follows: *“I thought that for the sake of my country and the future of my homeland, Prince Cuza could no longer be tolerated, for this alone I broke my oath, but today I am no longer worthy to call myself a Romanian officer, although I am a soldier at heart. I will follow the army only in case of war.”*⁽³⁶⁾

Trying to ease the tension and defend the army’s reputation, Prince Carol expressed his belief that what happened on February 11th was not the result of a military conspiracy, but the expression of the nation’s will. He reiterated this argument during the meeting with the general staff officers on May 12/24, 1866, telling them that “The army did its duty.”⁽³⁷⁾

Prince Carol’s statements failed to ease the contradictions within the army. Only a few days later, on May 23/June 4, 1866, a group of over 148 officers⁽³⁸⁾, led by Generals Ioan Emanoil Florescu and Savel Manu, handed him a petition written in a very firm tone. Essentially, it called on the new ruler to restore military honour by investigating which officers were guilty of betrayal on the night of February 10-11, 1866 – officers who had “trampled upon military honour and their most sacred duties” – and to have them judged and punished according to military rules. The petition stated that “this act is an indelible stain on the entire army, which, however, does not want to be associated with its perpetrators and proclaims its own innocence through this petition.”⁽³⁹⁾

33. Grigore Chiriță, “Armata, detronarea lui Cuza Voda și Carol de Hohenzollern (II)” in *op.cit.*, p. 1128.

34. Th. C. Văcărescu, *Din vremea lui Cuza Vodă* în “Magazin istoric”, year XXVII, no. 5 (314), May 1993, p.8.

35. Colonel Nicolae Haralambie directly participated in the coup against Prince Alexandru Ioan Cuza. He was part of the Royal Lieutenancy, which served as an interim leadership until the arrival of Prince Carol I. From August 16, 1866, to February 8, 1867, he served as Minister of War. Feeling guilty for his acts of betrayal, he resigned from the army in October 1867 and withdrew to private life. He returned to the army to participate in the 1877-1878 campaign for gaining independence. He was promoted to the rank of General on April 24, 1877. After the war, he once again returned to private life.

36. Grigore D. Polizu, *op.cit.*, p. 22.

37. Grigore Chiriță, “Armata, detronarea lui Cuza Voda și Carol de Hohenzollern (II)” in *op.cit.*, p. 1129.

38. It should be noted that in addition to the list of 148 signatures, there were others who were not in Bucharest at the time of signing. In 1866, the entire army numbered around 974 officers, of whom a third resided in Bucharest.

39. A.D.Xenopol, *op.cit.*, p. 86; The list of officers who signed the petition in I.G. Valentineanu, *op.cit.*; C.Giurescu, *op.cit.*, pp. 454-455.

There was also discontent regarding the promotion of some of those involved in the coup of February 11, an action seen as a reward for betrayal. In his memoirs, Carol I observed that “This step by the officers provokes great dissatisfaction both in the ministry and in the Chamber, as both are mostly composed of men who consider that revolution to be an act of wisdom and political justice.”⁽⁴⁰⁾ It is understood that Prince Carol had adopted the narrative promoted by the politicians around him, who had every interest in justifying Cuza’s dethronement with the hardly convincing argument that it represented the will of the nation. A nation which neither participated in nor was informed of any plans to remove the ruling prince. Equally significant, the officers considered guilty of violating military honour by rebelling against their own supreme commander were the very ones who, through their actions, had paved the way for Carol’s ascension to the throne, officers he needed to consolidate his rule and maintain internal stability. There was also fear that the rebellious reactions of some officers were motivated by a certain preference for the former prince, which could pose a risk of possible actions aimed at restoring him to the throne – a fear that ultimately proved unfounded. In his response, Prince Carol acknowledges that “politics must remain far from the soldier”, whose only mission is “to defend, to his last breath, his Sovereign and his country”, but he refuses to explicitly condemn the actions of February 11: “...I came to create a future, not to base my actions on a past which I neither know nor wish to know.”⁽⁴¹⁾

Conclusions

The abdication of Prince Cuza was the result of a plot involving important political leaders and segments of the military. On the side of the conspiracy, they were only several officers engaged, although they were not among the most senior members of the military hierarchy, they had direct access to the prince, being in charge of his personal protection.⁽⁴²⁾

It should be noted that not all of the capital’s garrison participated in the plot. Most of the military knew nothing about the “operation”, being faced with a *fait accompli*. However, there was no popular involvement and no resistance movement from those loyal to the deposed ruler. The coup d’état was largely met with indifference at the level of population.

40. *Memoriile Regelui Carol I. De un martor ocular*, vol I., 1866-1869, Ediție îngrijită și prefață de Stelian Neagoe, Editura Machiavelli, București, 1994, p. 65

41. *Cuvântările Regelui Carol I, 1866-1914*, vol. I (1866-1886), ed. Constantin C. Giurescu, Bucharest: “King Carol I” Foundation for Literature and Art, 1939, p. 13-14.

42. The participants were Colonels N. Haralambie, D. Crețulescu, I. Călinescu, Berendeiu, and Gheorghiu, Major Lecca, Captains Pilat, Mălinescu, Pioianu, Handoca, Costescu, and Candiano-Popescu, see A. D. Xenopol, “Domnia lui Cuza Vodă”, p.80. In 1898, the conservative newspaper “Epoca” still spoke about the conspiratorial officers of 1866, Lecca, Pilat, Candiano-Popescu, accusing them of betraying their military oath and criticizing the liberals who made them ministers or Generals. “Epoca”, series II, Year IV, May 9, 1898, p.1.

It was a well-organized action, conducted with the utmost discretion but also facilitated by the lack of precautionary measures on the part of the ruling prince and the lack of foresight from the authorities. Cuza did not resist or attempt to counteract the conspiratorial action, choosing instead to leave the country as quickly as possible and to leave open the path for the election of a foreign prince, a goal which he had, in fact, supported since the revolution of 1848.

The support of the troops from the Bucharest garrison was a key component in the overall conduct of the action. To prevent possible counter-reactions, efforts were made to attract unit commanders and neutralize those deemed unreliable, thereby ensuring both the discretion and the effectiveness of the general plan.

Undoubtedly, the ruler was taken by surprise by the actions of some officers whom he knew personally and supported throughout their military careers, and whom he considered loyal and faithful. Such was the case with the troops from the battalion of riflemen who guarded the palace, a battalion created by the prince in which he therefore trusted. However, it cannot be said that the troops were complicit. Later, when summoned to swear military allegiance to the Royal Lieutenancy, many officers refused to comply with the order, stating that “they did not consider themselves released from the oath made to the Prince Cuza until the legally constituted authority (the parliament, that is) had sanctioned the accomplished fact (the abdication).”⁽⁴³⁾ Some of them were arrested, but most resigned from the army.

As a career officer with deep respect for military values and honour, Prince Carol found himself forced to protect the conspiratorial officers, as his reign was, after all, a result of the events of February 11. Taking a firm stance against those officers who were part of the conspiracy created deep divisions within the army, putting the new prince in an especially complicated situation. His goal was to manage the major challenges generated by the political changes in the Principalities, and for the success of this endeavour he needed stability, as well as the cohesion and dedication of the army. He could not ignore the influence and strength of the message taken up by the officers loyal to Cuza. In reality, there is no evidence to suggest that there was any plan or intention to restore Cuza to the Romanian throne. Indeed, the former prince vehemently rejected such a scenario. This was not the aim of those who took a stand against the conspiratorial officers. Without excluding other reasons or causes of discontent, the actions of those who opposed the officers involved in the coup can be explained more by reasons of military honour than by political loyalty. Contemporary sources show that the primary concern was the need to protect the image of the army and military honour.

Prince Carol found himself in a complicated situation as he had no choice than to defend those participating in the coup against Cuza. But it was also an important lesson:

43. *Memoriile Principelui Nicolae Șuțu-mare logofăt al Moldovei 1798-1871*, translation and annotation by Georgeta Filitti, Bucharest: Editura Humanitas, 2013, pp. 361-362.

the military should not be allowed to be involved in political life and should not have a political agenda. And he took every measure necessary to ensure that there would never be another February 11th.

Over time, Prince Carol came to understand the position of officers who insisted on convicting those guilty of treason. It was not an action against him, as he had feared, aiming at bringing back Prince Cuza, but a matter of principle. This reality would later be acknowledged by Prince Carol himself, who, on April 17/29, 1872, wrote to his father: “the officers who were devoted to Cuza are precisely the ones I can count on, because they were faithful to a principle, and not to a person.”⁽⁴⁴⁾

Author’s short CV

Director of the Institute for Political Studies of Defense and Military History with the Romanian Ministry of National Defense. She graduated Faculty of History from the University of Bucharest in 2000 and she holds a PhD in international relations and political sciences at National School of Administrative and Political Studies in Bucharest.

Author of various studies and articles, published in Romania and abroad, on topics related to: Romanian defense policy, military diplomacy, history of alliances, and regional security. Her most recent publications include:

Romanian-Ottoman-Turkish Political and Military Relations 1878-1989. Documents, vol.I-II, Bucharest, 2023-2024.

Member of various international associations and scientific organizations and member of the Board of the International Commission of Military History and co-chair of the Conflict Studies Working Group of the Partnership for Peace Consortium of Defense Academies and Security Studies Institutes.

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44. *Memoriile regelui Carol I al României. De un martor ocular*, vol. II 1869-1875, Ed. Stelian Neagoe, Editura Scripta, Bucharest, 1993, pp. 230-231.