

# Centenary (Romania)

By [Florin Ţurcanu](#)

**The centenary of the end of the Great War was celebrated in Romania as the “Centenary of the Great Union” of 1918 and an official program to commemorate this event was deployed both on national and international level. This was an opportunity to celebrate, in the mirror of history, Romania’s place in a politically secure environment provided by the country’s membership in both the EU and NATO. At the same time, thirty years after the end of the national-communist regime of Ceauşescu, a new memory of the Great War emerged in Romanian society.**

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## Introduction: A Forgotten War

The year of the 1918 centenary was celebrated in [Romania](#) as the “Centenary of the Great Union,” suggesting one step further in the completion of the national unification of Romanians, which began in 1859 with the “little union” of Moldavia and Wallachia, the Danubian Principalities. Traditionally, the year 1918 was consecrated in the [national memory](#), starting with the interwar period, as the year when the historical provinces populated mostly by Romanians, still part of the Tsarist (Bessarabia) and Austro-Hungarian (Transylvania and Bukovina) [Empires](#), were integrated in the Romanian kingdom following the effects of the [collapse of these empires](#). After the fall of the communist regime in 1989, the Romanian parliament provided new substance to the association of year 1918 with the “Great Union” by declaring a National Day on 1 December in replacement of the communist national holiday of 23 August. On 1 December 1918, at the “Great National Assembly” in Alba Iulia, the vote of the 1,228 delegates of the majority Romanian population in Transylvania had decided to separate this province from Hungary and unite with Romania. The choice of 1 December as the new national holiday inscribed in the post-communist Constitution of 1991 traced a symbolic separation line between the Romanian majority and the Hungarian minority (6.5 percent of the total population in 2011) who traditionally considered the union of Transylvania and Romania as a unilateral Romanian act.

The association of the year 1918, not so much with the end of World War I but with the “Great Union” favoured, after 1989, the migration of war’s memory on a secondary frontline in the public consciousness and in official commemorations. The memory of the political event of the “Great Union” overshadowed that of the great armed conflict which made possible the completion of Romanian national unity via its own end. This overshadowing of the Great War in post-communist Romania also finds its explanation in the fact that historical research and memorial claims targeted, immediately after 1989, other events and periods which had been avoided by the official [historiography](#) and the memory validated by [Nicolae Ceauşescu’s \(1918-1989\)](#) regime. World War II, the Romanian gulag, or the forced collectivization operated by the communist regime in villages turned into key

topics of memory and historiography and World War I became, in post-1989 Romania's first two decades, a "forgotten war."<sup>[1]</sup> This hindered both historiography as well as those interested in history from becoming aware of the revolution that the study and international perception of the Great War was going through, given the extension of the cultural history paradigm in the research of this conflict.<sup>[2]</sup>

## National Commemoration

Although it began in 2014, the national programme "Romania 100" adopted by the government to prepare for the anniversary of the "Great Union's" centenary anniversary in 2018, initially confronted financial uncertainties and recurrent shifting of governmental structures meant to implement it. This triggered criticism from the media, though authorities eventually found mechanisms encouraging the participation of the public in creating the repertoire of the visual identity of the event and stimulating the submission of anniversary and educational project proposals locally and internationally. The Ministry of Culture and National Identity received 150 million lei (the equivalent of 33 million euros) to fund various projects locally, nationally, and internationally.<sup>[3]</sup> On 22 October 2018, 671 projects consisting of events dedicated to the centenary of the "Great Union" were listed as approved by the Ministry of Culture and National Identity.

The official commemoration project covered both the anniversary of the 1918 union as well as the centenary of World War I, thus relaunching the topic of the war in the Romanian public space. The official project also moved forward a series of principles and themes meant to illustrate, first of all, the values of today's Romania rather than exclusively restoring the memory of the final year of the Great War. The 1918 union was promoted, firstly, as an example of unity in the Romanian political elite at the time to accomplish a national objective. This was to serve as an example to the current political Romanian leadership to promote national objectives inside the EU and NATO. The Ministry of Culture indicated a series of values and principles which the anniversary of 1918 was to celebrate, among which modern patriotism, tolerance and cultural diversity within the country's borders, and agreement and international cooperation.<sup>[4]</sup> The general themes suggested by the ministry to project authors aiming to receive funding, favours the optimistic representation of a Romania able to look calmly at the year 1918 through the lens of consensual memory where contradictions and conflicts are dispelled. This memory relied on the certainties of the present and the ambition to preserve Romania as "a factor of stability" at the border of the EU and NATO. This marks a clear distancing from the conflicted memory and emotions which the anniversary of the "Great Union" used to evoke during Ceaușescu's regime and the first post-communist decade.

Another suggestive example of the distancing from 1990 is the lessened symbolic status of the "Greater Romania" map on the occasion of the centenary. Two anniversary medals were designed for this. The first commemorates Romania's participation in World War I and holds the name of Commemorative medal "Centenary of the War for National Reunification" while the second is dedicated to "The Centenary of the Great Union." The latter has Romania's interwar map engraved, surrounded by the map of the provinces in the composition of the Romanian state in 1918. One has to note that the map of interwar "Greater Romania" was not transformed, on the occasion of the centenary, in a highly omnipresent symbol, as it was not part of the official series of symbols endorsed by the Romanian government for this anniversary. In general, the anniversary of the "Great Union" in 1918 was not the opportunity to carry out rhetoric, formal or informal, meant to suggest Romanian territorial claims to its neighbours, Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova. These countries contain within their present borders territories adjoining Romania in 1918 and populated, especially the Republic of Moldova, by Romanian speakers. This contrasts with the nationalist rhetoric and the symbolism of "Greater Romania" largely employed in the first decade after the collapse of the Romanian communist regime, as well as political instabilities and insecurities of the 1990s. The obvious lower symbolist significance of the map of "Greater Romania" on the occasion of the centenary also suggests that Romanian society went further away from the hopes cultivated in the 1990s regarding a potential reunification of Romania with the Republic of Moldova after the collapse of the USSR.

The diverse ways in which World War I and the "Great Union" in 1918 were commemorated occurred locally, as well as nationally and internationally. In towns or counties, there were numerous cases where the participation of the locals or the political events leading to the union were commemorated. In Transylvania, commemorations often focused on the local memory of Romanian communities engaged in the selection of their representatives voting in Alba Iulia, on 1 December 2018, for the union of the province with Romania. The engagement of local communities, often rural, in remembering the personalities of their political representatives in December 1918 and the mobilisation at that time to support the union took diverse expressions, from conferences and symposia to commemorative religious services and restoration of funerary monuments, launches of new monuments, or even re-enactment of peasants' convoys transporting, sometimes hundreds of kilometres, the participants to the

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Great National Assembly in Alba Iulia.<sup>[5]</sup>

Sometimes, the commemoration of events in the last months of 1918 could give rise to memories of the conflictual Romanian-Hungarian scenes taking place locally in Transylvania. [Ioan Arion's \(1894-1918\)](#) assassination, on 30 November 1918, the flagbearer of one Romanian rural delegation to the National Assembly in Alba Iulia was, thus, commemorated by a new bust raised in Teiuş, where he lost his life, and another one in his home village.<sup>[6]</sup>

The 1 December anniversary remained a sore point in the memory of the Hungarian minority, which considered itself not able to fully share the national holiday with the Romanian majority.<sup>[7]</sup> In the lead up to 1 December, the centenary's festive events were covered in the Hungarian press in Romania in a rather neutral tone. The centenary also gave the opportunity for various political and civic organisations of the Hungarian minority to express their views about the historical significance of the 1918 events for their community and about Romanian-Hungarian coexistence 100 years after the end of World War I. Occasionally, claims for territorial autonomy of the so-called "Szekler land" in Eastern Transylvania were also expressed and in some cases press articles and public statements contained bitter and sometimes downright offensive assertions directed against the Romanian historical past.<sup>[8]</sup> Overall, thirty years after the fall of communism, it was nevertheless obvious that there is noticeably more room for dialogue and interaction between the two communities than in the first post-communist years.<sup>[9]</sup>

## Large Number of Monuments

One of the most remarkable aspects of the commemoration of 1918 in Romania was the large number of statues, busts, and other commemorative monuments launched for this occasion. If in some cases these monuments brought to surface the elements of local memory related to events during years 1916-1918, there was, on the other hand, an explicitly reparatory characteristic in the case of launching some of these monuments. This includes the case of three busts commissioned by both public and private local initiatives of Greek-Catholic bishop [Luliu Hossu \(1885-1970\)](#), who read the Declaration of Transylvania's union with the Kingdom of Romania in Alba Iulia on 1 December 1918.<sup>[10]</sup> He was later to be persecuted and imprisoned by the communist regime. Another example of memorial repair is the Vidra monument (Vrancea county) inaugurated in 2018, the first to be erected solely in memory of women who, in 1917, behind German lines, risked their lives to allow the escape of [Romanian prisoners](#) who wished to reach the unoccupied area of the country to rejoin the ranks of their army.<sup>[11]</sup>

The most obvious reparatory aspect of the new monuments launched for this occasion was in the case of those related to Romania's monarchs between 1914-1927: [Ferdinand I, King of Romania \(1865-1927\)](#) and [Marie, Queen, consort of Ferdinand I, King of Romania \(1875-1938\)](#). The erection of such monuments in the public space, which continued after the end of 2018, was considered a late correction of the destruction or removal of public monuments celebrating the Romanian monarchy at the beginning of the communist regime. In the 1940s, the statues and busts of King Ferdinand and Queen Marie had vanished from all Romanian localities where they had been placed during the interwar era. After the fall of the communist regime, some of the busts of the two monarchs were launched in various places with no particular public reaction; however, the centenary of the "Great Union" recorded a higher number of such monuments in a relatively short period. Between 2018 and 2020, statues and busts of King Ferdinand and Queen Marie were placed in Bucharest, Iaşi, Timişoara, Constanţa, Oradea, Bacău, Giurgiu, and Lipova, as well as in smaller places. Their representations thus fully recovered the status of a symbol of the Great Union which they held in the Romanian interwar period. A novel element of this commemoration was that in the Republic of Moldova, whose territory between the Prut and Dniester rivers was part of interwar Romania under the name of "Bessarabia," several busts of King Ferdinand were inaugurated on the occasion of the centenary, to replace those destroyed in 1940 when the province was annexed to the Soviet Union.<sup>[12]</sup>

The celebration of the French-Romanian [alliance](#) during World War I and French support to Romania during the [Paris Peace Conference](#) was also, in the context of the centenary, the subject of public events. The personality of the head of the French military mission in Romania between 1916-1918, General [Henri-Mathias Berthelot \(1861-1931\)](#), was restored in the collective memory by launching an impressive statue of the general in Bucharest at the initiative of the city hall. During the communist regime, Berthelot's role had been obscured in the official version of Romania's participation in the Great War.<sup>[13]</sup> The Romanian Academy also organised a commemorative session and an exhibition dedicated to the memory of the French general, and a commemorative stamp was dedicated to him as well.<sup>[14]</sup>

Another French personality honoured in 2018 was the geographer [Emmanuel de Martonne \(1873-1955\)](#), who was decisively engaged in mapping Romania's new border at the Paris Peace Conference. His bust – the first of its kind in Romania – was unveiled right before Romania's national celebration in Alba Iulia's central park, alongside the bust of American President, [Woodrow Wilson \(1856-1924\)](#).<sup>[15]</sup> Two other busts of the French geographer were inaugurated on the occasion of the centenary in the Transylvanian cities of Oradea and Cluj.

Two large monuments of national importance, meant to celebrate the union in 1918 were planned to be erected, one in the "capital of the Union" Alba Iulia and the second in Arad.<sup>[16]</sup> The monument in Alba Iulia was the only one completed, inaugurated on 1 December 2018 by President Klaus Iohannis. Built in stone, twenty-two metres high, and weighing 1,530 tons, the monument represents all Romanian provinces united one century ago. The cost of this monument was over 2 million euros.<sup>[17]</sup>

## International Dimensions of the Centenary

The anniversary of the 1918 union also had an international dimension, meant to promote Romania's image in the world. This international dimension was encouraged via projects funded by the Ministry of Culture and initiatives meant to present Romania's music, theatre, folklore, and archaeological heritage, while the military and political history of the year 1918 were less under the spotlight. Some of the actions carried out outside of the country addressed the numerous Romanian diasporas in some western European countries. The most anniversary activities outside Romania took place in the Republic of Moldova, while exhibitions, concerts, performances funded by the Romanian Ministry of Culture took place in Hungary, Serbia, France, the United Kingdom, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, the United States, and Israel. The anniversary of the year 1918 provided additional visibility to commemorating Romanian World War I prisoners of war, who died in the prison camps of central Europe. A commemorative monument for these prisoners was inaugurated in 2018 in Worms, Germany.<sup>[18]</sup>

One of the supporting elements for the Romanian centenary commemorations outside Romania was reviving the figure of Queen Marie in the European memory. She had been a well-known personality on the international stage in the years of the Great War and during the interwar period. Granddaughter of [Victoria, Queen of Great Britain \(1819-1901\)](#) and related to the Russian imperial family, she was engaged, as Romania's monarch, in her adoptive country's participation in the war, as well as the talks of the Paris Peace Conference. Queen Marie, who had during her lifetime been an international symbol of Romania, has thus regained, one century later, some of the role she had had during her lifetime. Out of the events dedicated abroad to the centenary of the union in 1918, the inauguration of a new statue of Queen Marie of Romania in her hometown, Ashford in the county of Kent, on 12 December 2018 stands out. Funded by the Romanian government and featuring the work of sculptor Valentin Duicu, the statue presents the queen in attire inspired by Byzantine art, which she wore for her coronation in Alba Iulia in 1922. The inauguration of her statue was followed by an educational programme carried out with the support of the Romanian Cultural Institute in several schools and colleges in the county of Kent and whose purpose was to bring the biography of the historical character represented by Queen Marie to the attention of students.<sup>[19]</sup> The Romanian Cultural Institute – through its offices abroad – and the association Cultural Romania promoted the figure of Queen Marie internationally as well through an exhibition entitled "The Queen Soldier" and the photograph album "The Queen and the Warfront" presented in several European capitals, including London, Berlin, Rome, Brussels, Warsaw, and Ljubljana, as well as in the United States.<sup>[20]</sup>

One outcome of the anniversary of the centenary of the "Great Union" was the opening of the "France-Romania Cultural Season" internationally, under the official auspices of the celebration of the end of the Great War and the start of the Romanian presidency of the EU Council 1 January 2019. The opening of the France-Romania Cultural Season took place in Paris on 27 November 2018, in the presence of the President of France Emmanuel Macron and the President of Romania Klaus Iohannis and over 400 French and Romanian delegates. The memory of the Franco-Romanian alliance during the war served as a symbolic reference and starting point of the events. This explains the fact that a military ceremony to commemorate French and Romanian soldiers fallen during World War I took place at Hôtel des Invalides as part of the opening of the France-Romania Cultural Season.<sup>[21]</sup> The memory of an episode of the Great War – the solemn return to the Romanian army of the battle flag of [Stephen III, Prince of Moldavia \(1433-1504\)](#) captured by the French in Macedonia in 1917 was the starting point of an exhibition of Byzantine-tradition religious embroidery from Romania at the Louvre.<sup>[22]</sup>

## Conclusion: Toward a New Memory of the Great War

Even more than the memory of the union in 1918, the memory of the world war seems to have mostly benefitted from the centenary celebrated in 2018 in the consciousness of Romanian society. The most visible and durable result of preparing the anniversary of the “Great Union” was regaining interest in World War I among historians, publishers, the media, and the Romanian public in general. The international character of the centenary of the Great War certainly contributed to this memorial sensitiveness towards the inaugural conflict of the past century. However, the preparations for Romanian unification played a key role in Romanian society’s rediscovery of the war. Pushed towards the periphery of collective memory after 1989, World War I returned into focus as the anniversary of the “Great Union” came close. A large number of exhibitions and albums dedicated to Romania’s participation in the conflict joined the publication or re-publication of numerous memoirs, diaries, and [correspondence](#) about the war. [Art](#) inspired by various experiences of war, from life in the trenches to the captivity drama of prisoners of war or fleeing civilians came to the attention of the public again, so that they could thus discover or rediscover the association of key Romanian painters and sculptors with World War I. Two art exhibitions stand out in terms of importance: one entitled “Testimonies from the Great War,” organised by the Romanian Academy in October 2017, including over 150 works completed by twenty-four artists. The second was “Warfront workshop. Romanian artists in the Great War 1916-1918,” organised by Romania’s National Art Museum, which presented 127 works of painting, sculpture, and drawings in Bucharest and Rome.<sup>[23]</sup>

The number of scientific reunions, national and international, of academic collections of studies and papers dedicated to the war also increased, as a trend of leaving behind the old historiographic tradition from Ceaușescu’s “national communism” became notable. The diversification of research topics dedicated to daily life during the war, the experience of captivity, family, and demographics was obvious, and one of the most appreciated books is dedicated to the history of [women in Romania](#) during World War I.<sup>[24]</sup> This process of thematic diversification also favoured the debut of reintroducing the history of Romania’s participation in World War I to the wider territory of European historiography.<sup>[25]</sup>

Restoring the history of the war favoured its perception as an exceptional experience and as a collective trauma undergone in various contradictory ways by individuals from all strata confronted with suffering, fear, and death. Bringing the testimonies of those who, as militaries and civilians, had lived the experience of the Great War under the spotlight was the most innovative characteristic of publications dedicated to the centenary of this event. The experiences of the front, captivity, or daily life behind the front or under foreign occupation contributed to reshaping a new image of the years 1916-1918. Several Romanian publishers decided to publish this literature, largely fully unknown or forgotten, which resulted in the publication of numerous books between 2014-2020. Statistics covering four of the Romanian publishers most interested in publishing memoirs, diaries, and correspondence (Humanitas, Corint, Military Publishing House, and Junimea) show that they published thirty-four volumes of memoirs and diaries about World War I in Romania. This includes, firstly, unpublished memoirs and diaries, seconded by republishing forgotten testimonies never published after the establishment of the communist regime. This share of diaries and memoirs in the overall range of publications dedicated to the centenary of the war enriched notably the references for a new history of Romania’s participation in the Great War and highlighted the fact that the historiography of Ceaușescu’s era had constructed an image of this conflict avoiding the use of individual testimonies since they might have likely contradicted the official historical discourse about political and military events.

One could conclude that the centenary of the year 1918 thus favoured a reconnection to the memory of World War I by Romanian society, outside the symbolic domination of the “Great Union’s” events and the traditional pressure of an official historical and political discourse enduring from Ceaușescu’s time to the last years of the past century.

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## Notes

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