

## THE MILITARY FUNCTION OF MUREȘ GATE

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**Abstract:** In this article I try to present a different side of geography, the military geography. Military geography role is to study the characteristics of land in military terms and relief the importance of knowledge elements in organizing the fight. Knowledge of the field strengths can make the difference between victory and defeat, and applying appropriate tactics can change the tide of battle.

**Key words:** defense war, patriotic war, independence war

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### INTRODUCTION

The notion of gate is defined in dictionaries as:

- a loop in a wall, fence which allows the entrance from the inside to the outside and vice versa (DLRC, 2000);
- the access point in a fortress, city, which together with the mobile panels and other accessories form an ensemble (DLRC, 2000).

Geographically the notion of „*gate*” designates an alley between two rows of mountains (DLRC, 2000). From a geographic and military point of view, the gate can be defined as an ensemble of geographic and planimetry details, crossed by a relative long valley which forms an opening towards the inside of the territory, situated especially on an (strategic, operational) entry path which from a military perspective is an strategy of non-entry/attack which enables the action of military force and means (LM, 1994). Bearing in mind the statement made by a great politician and military man who said that, „*no war can be carried outside the means of communication*” (Foch, 1975), the military practice focuses on the battle in the mountains and in this setting the battle for passes is of utmost importance. For always the action carried in the mountains had in view the battle around passes, the battle for their opening or defense being the major purpose, the essence itself of the military confrontations in the mountain areas.

### THE HISTORY OF THE SUBJECT IN FOCUS

The military phenomenon in the area of study began with the emergence of the first types of human settlements, but the most prominently this was observed during the reign of Burebista. He managed to gather the Getic tribes North of the Danube in one state, this being basically the birth of the unitary, centralized and independent Dacian state. The consequences from military

point of view were considerable by forming a strong, permanent army which could reach up to 200.000 fighters, but also the development of a highly developed system of fortifications. As main armament, they had swords (straight and curved), daggers, pruning knives, combat knives, spears, arrowheads, but also pieces for individual protection: shields, helmets and armors. The straight swords can be classified into three main types long swords (they had a great length, nearly 0,9 m), swords resembling the Roman sword (gladius) (they distinguish by the unusual size of the handle) and swords with straight blade, with triangular section (Gudea, 1986).

Knowing the expansionist needs of the Roman Empire south of the Danube, Burebista designed a large fortification system, starting north of the Danube and up around the capital Sarmisegetuza, in Orăştie Mountains, developing defense works in the passes, on the probable directions of attack of the Romans. Thus, there emerged fortresses and fortifications in the Oriental Gate, in Banat Mountains and the southern of the Meridional Carpathians, but most of such works occur on the southern part of the capital of the Dacian state. After the death of King Burebista, came the reign of Diurpaneus, who after the battle from 87 AD from Tapae (in Orăştie Mountains, basically when entering the current pass Deva – Căpruța) takes the name of Decebal (Decebalus), which meant strong. After the second campaign to conquer the Dacian state of the Roman Empire and their second defeat, the kingdom of Decebal becomes more powerful, although less vast than the one during the reign of Burebista, including Transylvania, Moldova and the Meridional Sub-Carpathians. Under these circumstances, this reign becomes more coveted for because of its power and riches, so that, in the next period, during the reign of Emperor Traian, he leads two conquest campaigns, the last one having chances of success (the campaign from 105-106).

In 106 Dacia became Roman province under the name of Dacia Felix, having the capital at Ulpia Traiana Sarmisegetuza. Both during and after the reign of Traian, the fortification system develops, both along the border as well as in depth, aimed mainly at thwarting attacks, especially by surprise, made by other people (Gudea, 1987).

The road system from the study area included the main road junction, the capital of the province, connected to main roads of the provinces: from the capital Sarmisegetuza to Drobeta, through the two southern corridors from the West, the Eastern Gate and Lainici and the southeastern one, Novaci (the current road is named „*Transalpina*”) of Jiu Gate, toward Apullum (actually Alba Iulia) locality, the current DN 7, but also towards West, on the same DN 7, in the pass known under the name Deva – Căpruța.<sup>1</sup>

During the XIII – XVIII centuries, no notable events took place that could arouse the interest for a detailed study. Tangentially, the rebellion of Gheorghe Doja can be remembered (1514) that, however, while travelling to Timișoara used the roads existing in the area of study but fought no battle in these areas. Also during this period, the feudal fortresses emerged in the plain and hill areas in order to protect the nobility, but also as genuine control points in some conflicts. So, fortresses such as the one from Căpâlnaş (dated from the Roman period, attested in the XV<sup>th</sup> century), Arad – Vladimirescu (IX – XI centuries), Căpruța (XV<sup>th</sup> century), Cladova (Păuliș village – dated from the Dacian period and attested in the XI<sup>th</sup> century) etc. emerged (Anghel, 1972).

The revolt led by Horia, Closca and Crișan, started from the villages around Brad on the 31<sup>st</sup> October 1784, represents a defining moment in the national history of Romanians, taking into account the amplitude of the achievements of the army of the Romanians from the region of the Apuseni Mountains. Thus, one can observe the use of the Romanian military practices and their enrich from the organizational point of view: mobilizing all those who are capable to wear a weapon and to use it, the plan of the concrete battle actions – harassing the enemy, judicious use of the land and of the orographic elements specific to the mountain area, preparing the land for defense and prolonged resistance in a vast territory. All these have stimulated the concerns of the progressive political forces to build a modern defense system, based on doctrinaire principles of the armed nation (Ceausescu et al., 1984).

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<sup>1</sup> [www.cnadr.ro](http://www.cnadr.ro)

In the years of the Second World War, Mureș Gate was the site of bloody battles for liberation of the country from the invader yoke. From all these fights, one can distinguish, both from the point of view of the drama nature and of the bravery of the Romanian soldiers, the fights of the Detachment Păuliș at the mouth of Mureș defile from the 14<sup>th</sup> of September 1944.

As a result of the losses incurred by the Romanian troops, these were obliged to stop the offensive on strong field alignments, allowing the Hungarian army to pass to the movement offensive, the route Arad – Deva – Alba-Iulia being the most important way of access, which allowed the 3<sup>rd</sup> Hungarian army the return of the defense of the Romanian troops in the inner of the Central Reduit and also the encirclement and capture of a large part of the first echelon of the Romanian army that was fighting in Criș Basin. The enemy headquarters dedicated for opening the routes Arad – Alba-Iulia an armored division and several infantry Hungarian units strongly supported by artillery and German tanks, with the aim to conquer Arad and to continue the offensive on the route Arad – Deva. As a consequence of loosing Arad, having the 1<sup>st</sup> Romanian Cavalry Division with heavy casualties, the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Romanian Army ordered the commander of the Infantry N.C.O. School of Reserve from Radna to organize a defensive position in the area Păuliș – Ghioroc – Cuvin, at the entrance in the defile Mureș. To do this, the NCO School was reinforced with an infantry battalion and supported by a heavy artillery battalion, thus the „*Detachment Păuliș*” was formed, which, during 11 – 4 September 1944 prepared a well structured defensive position and a well formed fire system (RAAW, 1980).

The main enemy stroke was given in the direction Sâmbăteni – Păuliș, along with an enveloping of the right flank on the direction Cuvin – Miniș. With no chance of success, the enemy brought new forces into the battle and finally managed, on the 17th of September, to enter on the northeastern part of Miniș locality, where it fought a very violent battle with the soldiers of the Company 3 Pupils, who were defending the heights with the height 365, undermining the intentions of the enemy. The same afternoon, a Soviet battalion joined the Păuliș Detachment, which supported the actions of the pupils, then fighting strong front and flanks counterattacks, managing to repel the enemy towards the state border. In this confrontation, 202 Romanian heroes lost their lives. The art of war is of vital importance to the State. Earth comprises distances, great and small; danger and security; open ground and narrow passes. Each physical factor taken separately may have dominant role or secondary role, active or less active role, to act favorably or unfavorably (Pișota, 2002).

As it can be observed, the principle of securing the strong points of the territory, developed since Antiquity, so that it can protect the population, respectively own troops against a more numerous and well equipped in terms of military equipment enemy. As it can be seen, since antiquity the principle to secure the strong points of the territory, developed so that to protect the population, respectively own troops against an aggressive and more numerous and better equipped aggressor from the point of view of the technique of combat. Some elements of the military strategy were maintained from antiquity even today, some were changed and renewed, so the place and role of the bystanders incumbent to the system of the military actions fought in the mountains make from these one of the main elements of the geographic –military, tactical-operative analysis, which takes place at the level of military commands, both in peace and war time.

## **THE AREA OF STUDY**

### **Deva – Căpruța pass**

This pass is situated in the fourth Romania Operation Zone, (The West Operation Zone) ensuring defense of national territory against a possible aggression from the west (CGM, 1993). It is one of largest pass from Romania and its configuration can create serious problems for our troops, when enemy crosses the pass to Central Reduit. It is one of the most important passes due to its size, but also due to its characteristics and possibilities to road variants. It joins both the passes from Criș Basin on the North with the Central Reduit on the East, with the Eastern Gate, linking the southwest with Lainici pass. On leaving the enemy from passing, it can execute the

maneuver in any direction, creating serious problems in the defense of the national territory. It pointed out that in World War II, Hungarian troops attempted the conquest of the pass and then create junction with German troops that were fighting in Cris passes trying encirclement Romanian and Soviet troops who were fighting in the Cris passes, causing heavy casualties. As mentioned in the previous paragraphs, just daring and sacrifice of „Păuliş Detachment” made impossible such an action (CGM, 1993).

It stretches on approximately 92 km, on the area of Hunedoara and Arad counties, between Deva and Căpruța localities. The pass crosses the Mureş defile between Branişca and Zam, (about 33 km) and between Bătuța and Căpruța (about 5 km) and separates the Apuseni Mountains from Poiana Ruscă Mountains and Lipova Plateau.

The Mureş River accompanies the pass all the way and has widths between 106 and 120 m, average depths of 1,6 – 1,8 m and a flow of about 167 cubic meters, ensured by a water velocity of about 0.8 m/s. The areas most flooded are in the South, Pietriş locality, about 800 ha, Săvârşin, about 1000 ha as well as Ilia and Burjuc localities, about 5 600 ha. On this piece of land it is not advisable to ford the Mureş River, because of the steep banks and of the sandy riverbed, sometimes even swampy. Forcing the river is only recommended in Săcămaş – Gurasada sector. Between Brănişca and Cîmpuri / Surduc and Zam and Bătuța the banks are gentle and they have beaches, which, with certain precautions, would allow fording the river. The major stream bed of 4/5 km 3 km longer on the right bank in Deva – Gurasada sector and on the left bank between Ilia and Burjuc, as well as between Zam and Bata (Ciobanu et al., 1991).

Most of the areas of the mountain slopes are covered with deciduous forests and orchards. The most important tributaries of the river Mureş, in terms of flow and length are on the right side: Căian, Boz, Sârbi, Gurasada, Almaş, Valea Roşie, Troaş, Vâneşti, Julița, Grosu, and on the left side Leşnic, Abucea, Valea Mare, Somonița, which do not pose particular challenges in terms of forcing and fording. The average amount of rainfall decreases from 760 mm/year in the area of Lipova locality to about 600 in Deva (Cucu, 1981).

### **ROUTES IN THE PASS**

The roads are well represented; one can travel on both sides of the Mureş River. The communication on the right bank is made of the national road 7, between the localities Deva and Căpruța, and on the left bank, the communication Deva – Veţel – Dobra – Marginea – Făget – Birchiş. Both road are asphalted and modernized, they provide two lanes, they have curves and declivities which pose no problems in terms of traveling for any of the categories of fighting technique, they ensure an increased traffic flow in both directions. On DN 7 the main communication in the pass consists of 18 bridges, all made of reinforced concrete, which pose no problems for the maximum allowable tonnage. If the communication Deva – Căpruța or some portions of it would be blocked, choosing another route can be done in several ways.

- if the sector between Deva and Ilia would be blocked, one might take the road on the right side of the Mureş river, on the itinerary Deva – Şoimuş – Fornadia – Tîrnava – Tîrnăvița – Bretea Mureşană – Ilia, on a distance of about 14 km. The road is of stone, in good conditions, except between Fornadia and Tîrnava where there is a country road ant it requires a prior arrangement.

- if the sector between Ilia and Săvîrşin or just portions of these would be blocked, one might take the road from the right side of the Mureş river, on the communication Săcămaş – Dobra – Lăsău – Tisa – Pojoga – Căprioara – Căpîlnaş – Săvîrşin, about 34 km. Up to Lăsău the road is made of concrete, with two lanes, it provides a good traffic flow and raises no special problems, and between Lăsău and Căpîlnaş the road is paved and has one lane only. On this road there are 5 bridges that can stand different load classes. Also, if the communication Lăsău – Tisa – Pojoga – Caprioara - Căpîlnaş – Săvîrşin would be blocked or impracticable, another possible road would be on Lăsău – Lăpungiul de Jos – Margina – Făget – Căpîlnaş – Săvîrşin, on a distance of 72 km,

from which 33 are on the national road Deva – Lugos, modernized road, with possibilities to travel on two lanes for any technique.

- if the road between Săvrîșin and Căpruța or just parts of it would be blocked, another road that can be followed is the one on the right side of the river Mureș, on the communication Căpâlnaș – Bichiriș – Bata – Lipova, on a distance of 55 km, paved road with asphalted parts, which offers possibilities to travel on two lanes, with exit from the pass at about 30 km.

The railway communications are represented by the main line Brașov – Sighișoara – Teiuș – Vințu de Jos – Simeria – Arad, with a length of 460 km.<sup>2</sup>

It is one of the most important transport directions in the country, because it allows train hauling of big tonnage (over 2.000 tons), it has double track, and the big works of art that make problems in terms of their removal from service, are situated at big distances one from another. At the same time, the transport capacity is very big, and the traction is electric on the entire distance.

As a conclusion, the pass along the Mureș valley crosses a large area of hills and plateaus, with relatively low altitudes (the axis of the pass marks the middle of the Western Carpathians), it is a favorable direction to fight and allows the use of all types of weapons both from the Transylvanian Plateau to the Western Plain and vice versa. The defense of the pass can be organized, first of all, even from the entrance, on a strong alignment of operational value like the one used by the Păuliș Detachment. Another defense alignment, of equal importance, can be organized at the exit from the pass. Its occupation and maintenance can lead, once the ratio of forces is changed locally, to its constitution into a strong leaving offensive base westward to free the territory occupied by the aggressor in this part of the country.

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