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Rumanian Aces of World War 2

Dénes Bernád





SERIES EDITOR: TONY HOLMES

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INTRODUCTION AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Writing about the exploits of Rumanian fighter pilots in World War 2 has been both an honour and a challenge. Presenting to an English-speaking audience the little-known deeds of the *vânători* – the Rumanian fighter pilots – is long overdue. The results achieved by these outstanding men are indeed noteworthy. They claimed over 1200 aircraft destroyed in the air and on the ground, and even if all of these claims cannot be verified, they were achieved by a small number of pilots. The price paid in return was over 100 fighter pilots killed, yet their achievements are comparable with the best of their adversaries'. And the Rumanians did face the toughest enemies. First, there was the Red Air Force, which by 1944 had grown into a formidable force. Then there was the USAAF, and finally, and perhaps most deadly of all, the Luftwaffe.

The airmen of the ARR (the Royal Rumanian Air Force), often flying obsolescent aircraft and from 1943 onwards technically inferior to the enemy's and usually fewer in numbers, fought these tough enemies with the same *élan*, gallantry and determination as their Allied counterparts. Almost 60 years after the war, it can be openly said that although for most of their careers they were on the losing side, the Rumanians – and pilots of the other smaller Axis air forces – cannot be considered morally inferior to their Allied counterparts. They fought with devotion for the cause they believed in – their homeland. They flew, and occasionally died, in their aircraft just as their adversaries did – with commitment, and sometimes fearful of imminent danger. This fact deserves unconditional respect, regardless of what is taught in schools or what is often erroneously considered 'political correctness'.

Obtaining a clear picture of the actions and achievements of the Rumanian fighter pilots was not easy. During more than 40 years under an oppressive Communist régime, Rumania's participation in the war against the Soviets was officially ignored. History books started on the night of 23 August 1944, when Rumania defected from the Axis camp and unilaterally joined the Allies. Most former pilots I interviewed during that dark period were at first reluctant to talk about their experiences on the eastern front. Some even refused. Sometimes my status as a member of the Hungarian ethnic minority did not help either. Nevertheless, after I had gained their confidence they began to reveal the stories of how they had fought the Soviets or the Americans.

Before actually meeting these veterans, whose names were well known within a restricted circle, I imagined them as tall, muscular figures with commanding voices, confident of their 'fighter' status. However, most proved to be rather small, thinly-built, frail old men who constantly brushed aside their 'larger-than-life' status. Rather than boosting their own individual successes and adventures, they often



The pilot of an ARR Bf 109G waggles his wings victoriously after a successful combat sortie on the eastern front in the spring of 1944. Seated around the table are, from right to left, *Cpt av Alexandru Serbănescu* (the second ranking Rumanian ace with 55 victories), *Of ech cl III av Ioan Milu* (the third ranking ace with 52 victories), *Adj av Ioan Mucenica* (the eighth ranking ace with 27 victories) and *Lt av Hariton Dusescu* (39th in the unofficial list of ARR aces with 12 victories). In four years of war, Rumanian fighter pilots claimed an estimated 1200 enemy aircraft destroyed in aerial combat or on the ground, which was the equivalent of approximately 1800 victories under the ARR's unique scoring system. In turn, the *vânători* lost more than 100 of their number in combat

showed their true character by directing attention to the sacrifices of former comrades who had lost their lives in the line of duty.

After the fall of Communism in December 1989 things changed, but I had left the country by then. Since 1992, I have returned every year to study the Rumanian archives, which are now open to a limited number of researchers. Now, after almost 20 years of unearthing, then piecing together the vital official information, I can state that the overall picture is fairly clear, and the time for a book about the *vânători* is ripe. But it is also a fact that the complete story cannot, and probably will not, ever be told.

With an estimated 95 per cent of all ARR victory claims processed in my database, I could draw up a tentative list of those pilots we glamorously call 'aces'. This 'master' list is the first serious and systematic attempt to compile a comprehensive register of Rumanian fighter pilots who scored at least five ARR victories. It should be noted, however – as detailed in the appendices – that according to ARR standards, a pilot was credited with *one or more* victories for an enemy aircraft downed in air combat or destroyed on the ground depending on the number of engines it had. As this atypical method of counting victories was the official standard, it is used throughout this book.

Due to the size of this publication, the amount of information which could be included on the *vânători*, and their aircraft, has, by necessity, been restricted. Nevertheless, I sincerely hope I have succeeded in presenting a fair and objective account of the Rumanian fighter pilots' achievements, successes and failures, victories and losses.

To all these men, who sacrificed their lives on the altar of their devotion and duty to their country, regardless of the colours their fighters wore, I express my utmost admiration and respect.

I would particularly like to thank Dan Antoniu and George Cicos from Bucharest for their invaluable help in compiling the 'master' list of 'aces'. The following veterans, colleagues and friends also offered assistance (in alphabetical order) – Mihai Andrei, Valeriu Avram, Ion Becherete, Răzvan Bujor, Ioan Di Cesare, Ion Dobran, Ion Galea (deceased), Vasile Gavriliiu (deceased), Teodor Greceanu (deceased), Dmitriy Karlenko, Ovidiu George Man, Cornel Marandiuc, Mihai Moiescu, Cornel Năstase, Victor Nitu, Horia Pop (deceased), Jean-Louis Roba and Ion Tarălungă (deceased). The staff at *Arhivele Militare Române* in Bucharest greatly assisted my researches as well.

Most of the photographs in this book come from the author's personal collection, as well as those of Dan Antoniu and Constantin Bujor. Other contributors were (in alphabetical order) – Valeriu Avram, Cristian Crăciunoiu, Ferdinando D'Amico, Ion Galea, Teodor Greceanu, Mihai Moiescu and Peter Petrick. Several photographs came from the official archives of BA, ECPA, MMN and SMP as well.

I dedicate this book to my parents, Bernád Dénes Sr and Bernád Katalin-Margit, who always encouraged me not to give up pursuing my dreams.

Dénes Bernád
Toronto,
February 2003

BACKGROUND TO WAR

Between the two World Wars, the Kingdom of Rumania was the most powerful and influential state in Eastern Europe and the Balkans. In that most volatile region it fielded the largest army, air force and navy, although it remained under the shadow of the Soviet Union. However, by the late 1930s Rumania was becoming increasingly threatened by some of its neighbours, particularly the USSR, Hungary and Bulgaria, which all sought to recover territories lost two decades earlier. Only countries created after World War 1, such as Poland, Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which bordered Rumania to the north and south-west, could be considered friendly.

Despite its strength on paper, the combat efficiency of *Aeronautica Regală Română* (ARR, or the Royal Rumanian Air Force) was less than adequate. The large number of aircraft types, along with a similarly wide variety of powerplants, created a maintenance nightmare. The result was low aircraft availability, making the numerically large ARR an inefficient and obsolescent air force when compared with the emerging trends in Europe, where many countries were re-arming.

In the 1930s increasing tension in Europe threatened the very existence of the so-called 'Greater Rumania', which had been created in the aftermath of World War 1. ARR headquarters finally decided to act, and a restructuring programme was ordered in June 1936.

As the first stage, obsolescent French and Polish types were to be replaced by 406 new aircraft – 60 reconnaissance, 132 observation and army co-operation machines, 150 fighters and 64 bombers. This would be enough to equip 36 new *escadrile* (squadrons) within the following two-and-half years. The second stage envisaged the purchase of a further 169 aircraft – 105 of which would be fighters – to create 13 new squadrons. These measures were to be implemented between 1 January 1939 and 1 April 1942. The third step called for another 96 aircraft to enter service by 1 April 1944. No further fighters were considered necessary for that period, although losses through attrition would be made good. Due to the precarious state of the indigenous aviation industry, most new aircraft would be purchased from abroad.

In April 1939, in pursuit of its ambitious plans, Rumania sent a substantial military delegation on a round of visits to armament factories in France and the United Kingdom, as well as Germany. The Rumanians returned with a shopping basket full of firm orders and promised deliveries. Fifty Hurricane Mk Is were ordered from Great Britain, with 12 for urgent delivery, while 30 'off-the-shelf' He 112Bs were purchased from Germany, with an additional 50 Bf 109Es also promised. But an unpleasant surprise awaited the Rumanians in France. That country, which until then had provided most of the



ARR's inventory, declined to supply significant numbers of fighters because they were badly needed by the *Armée de l'Air*.

On 12 August 1939, the influx of Western-built aircraft meant that the ARR had 121 combat-ready fighters. Besides the Polish gull-winged PZL P.11s and P.24s, which still formed the mainstay of the ARR's fighter force, the inventory also included the first He 112s and Hurricanes. By the following June, when war had been raging in Europe for more than nine months, 122 fighters were among the total of 587 frontline aircraft. This number comprised 30 PZL P.24Es, 30 He 112Bs, 20 Bf 109Es and 12 Hurricanes, together with 30 IAR 80s of indigenous manufacture. However, the latter type had not actually been delivered because the first batch was still undergoing acceptance testing at the factory. So, apart from the latest Bf 109Es, the most noticeable difference compared to the previous year's line-up was that the obsolescent IAR-built PZL P.11B/Fs were no longer listed as being in frontline service. This meant that by mid-1940 all the ARR's main fighter squadrons were equipped with modern equipment.

Compared to neighbouring countries, therefore, Rumania boasted a superior fighter force, but the wide range of aircraft of differing origins still hindered efficiency and reliability. Serviceability and shortage of spare parts remained the ARR's Achilles' heel, constantly reducing the number of serviceable machines by at least 20 to 30 per cent. With the withdrawal of the surviving Polish air force to Rumania in mid-September 1939, the inventory was unexpectedly enlarged by over 250 aircraft, including some 60 PZL fighters. But only about 30 P.11Cs could be considered as having any combat value, with the other Polish fighter types being relegated to training squadrons.



The order for 50 PZL P.11bs placed in 1933 represented a departure from the normal Rumanian policy of procuring fighters from France. This gull-winged Polish aircraft, powered by a French Gnome Le Rhône radial engine, formed the backbone of the ARR's fighter arm for the next five years – a time of rapid technological advance. Here, Luftwaffe personnel – veterans of the Polish Campaign of September 1939 – examine a P.11F painted in their new ally's colours. Note that although the Fleet F-10G trainer and liaison aircraft in the background already wears the new 'Michael's Cross' national markings, the P.11 still displays the pre-war cockades, suggesting that this photograph was taken in early May 1941, when the markings change took place. 'White 136' was seriously damaged during a dogfight with eight I-16s east of the River Dneestr during an early morning combat on 21 August 1941. Despite the damage, its pilot, *Slt av Mircea Dumitrescu* (a future ace with 13 victories) of *Grupul 3 vânătoare*, was able to return to his base at Elsass, in the Trans-Dnestra Region

Hurricane Mk I 'Yellow 1' was usually flown by *Cpt av Emil Georgescu*, CO of the independent *Escadrila 53 vânătoare*. By the end of the ARR's first campaign, Georgescu had been credited with four confirmed and one unconfirmed kills, amounting to eight victories – he did not claim any more victories. Note the mounted 'Mickey Mouse' with lance squadron emblem, inspired by the popular Disney cartoon character

INDIGENOUS FIGHTER

From the late 1930s, the Rumanian aircraft industry was also making significant progress, with the IAR works at Brasov achieving notable success. Following the failure to secure an order for its early fighter types, the IAR design team came up with a new fighter project in late 1938. Designated the IAR 80, this was based partly on knowledge gained from licence production of the Polish PZL P.24 fighter and the Italian Savoia-Marchetti SM.79B bomber. Powered by a French radial engine spinning a German propeller, the new design incorporated modern features like low-wing monoplane configuration, all-metal structure and a retractable undercarriage. Yet the aircraft retained an open cockpit, lacked radio equipment and was armed with no more than a pair of rifle-calibre 7.92 mm wing-mounted machine guns.

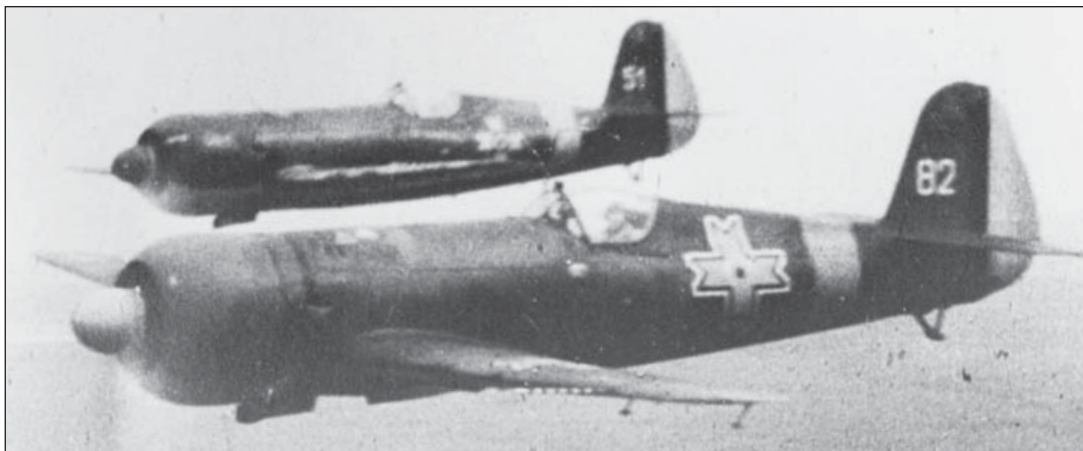
Nevertheless, when first flown in April 1939, the IAR 80 surpassed all expectations, and in December 1939 the Ministry of Air and Navy ordered 100. A similar order for the second batch of improved IAR 80As came the following August, but the first 20 early-series IAR 80s were not delivered until February 1941. This was due to a range of problems, including material shortages, delays in armament availability, undercarriage failures and engine unreliability. Initial deliveries were made to the *Flotila 2 vânătoare* (2nd Fighter Flotilla) and the new aircraft equipped *Escadrile 59* and *60 vânătoare* (59th and 60th Fighter Squadrons) of the newly created *Grupul 8 vânătoare* (8th Fighter Group). The next batch of 30 arrived at Târgsor in April.

Parallel deliveries of Bf 109Es were also being made, and by the spring of 1941 the remaining 30 on order had been accepted by the élite *Grupul 7 vânătoare*, formed on 1 June 1940 with Hurricanes and Bf 109Es. The newly-arrived machines took the available ARR fighter strength to a peak of 200+ frontline aircraft. This was just in time, as Rumania was about to go to war with the Soviet Union.

TURBULENT TIMES

At the outbreak of World War 2, Rumania was ruled by King Carol (Charles) II. He had seized the throne in 1930, and embraced an increasingly authoritarian style of leadership modelled on that of

A pair of IAR 80s patrol the Bessarabian sky in the summer of 1941. Closest to the camera is 'White 82' is *Slt av Arghir Borcescu*, who claimed two victories prior to being killed in a flying accident on 2 October 1941. His wingman is *Adj stag av Dumitru Borcescu*, who also claimed two victories. Both served with *Grupul 8 vânătoare*. Note that the engine cowlings on both machines are painted in camouflage colours instead of the usual Axis yellow, and that each aircraft has a different style of 'Michael's Cross' national marking



Italian dictator Benito Mussolini. Territorial losses to the USSR, Hungary and Bulgaria in 1940, along with his increasing unpopularity, forced the King to abdicate in favour of his 18-year-old son Mihai (Michael) on 6 September 1940. With the abdication of the King, real power in Rumania passed to the pro-German General, later Marshal, Ion Antonescu, who was declared *conducător*, or 'leader' (i.e. dictator) that same day. Now events moved swiftly. Ten days after Antonescu assumed power, the pro-Nazi 'Iron Guard' became the country's only recognised political party, and Rumania became a 'National Legionary State'. In early October, the first German troops arrived in Rumania, and the following month Antonescu travelled to Berlin to sign the Tripartite (Axis) Pact. Rumania was now firmly in the Axis camp.

Although the Rumanian Government did not accept Hitler's invitation to participate in the assault on Yugoslavia in April 1941, it allowed Luftwaffe units to launch attacks from Rumanian bases. Then, on 22 June 1941, Rumania declared war on the Soviet Union. The stage was set for tragedy and high drama, which would see Rumania fight on both sides, and then spend 45 years as a satellite of the USSR.

NEW COLOURS

In preparation for the war with the USSR a new national marking – a modified Maltese Cross – was adopted in mid-May 1941. It comprised four white bordered blue 'M's (for King Michael) arranged in the shape of a cross and filled with yellow. A small version of the earlier red-yellow-blue cockade was applied in the centre. In some cases a blue 'I' was also inserted between the legs of the four 'M's to symbolise King Michael I. As a further departure from the previous style, the new markings were applied in six positions, including the fuselage sides, rather than just on wing surfaces. To conform to Luftwaffe regulations, the engine cowlings of all ARR aircraft were painted in the chrome yellow Axis recognition colour. Additionally, like all Axis aircraft operating on the eastern front, a yellow band was also applied to the rear fuselage and undersurface wing tips of both military and civilian types. Sometimes, this band was also applied to upper wing tips of certain Rumanian types.

The earlier olive green/light blue camouflage scheme was retained, although from early 1941 large burned-out earth brown (*terra cotta*), and occasionally dark green, wavy stripes were painted above the olive green on the new machines manufactured by IAR Brasov, or purchased from abroad. Exceptions were British and Polish aircraft. They retained the original camouflage schemes, which basically complied with regulations up to the time of their first general overhaul, when standard ARR camouflage was applied.

Each aircraft received an individual serial number, applied in white (sometimes in yellow or red) on the fin rather than on fuselage sides as before. The sole exception was that German-built fighters had their serial numbers on the fuselage, usually between the national markings and the yellow band. There were no mandatory squadron emblems, although some fighter units had their own crests, often inspired by Disney cartoon figures. These new regulations were implemented by early June 1941, just in time for hostilities against the USSR.