

## THE MILITARY ROLE OF SOMEȘ 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:** patriotic war, defence war

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### INTRODUCTION

The notion of gate<sup>1</sup> is defined in dictionaries as:

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

Geographically, the notion of “gate”<sup>2</sup> designates an alley between two rows of mountains.

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.

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”, 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.

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<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of Contemporary Romanian Language*, The Scientific and Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, page 618

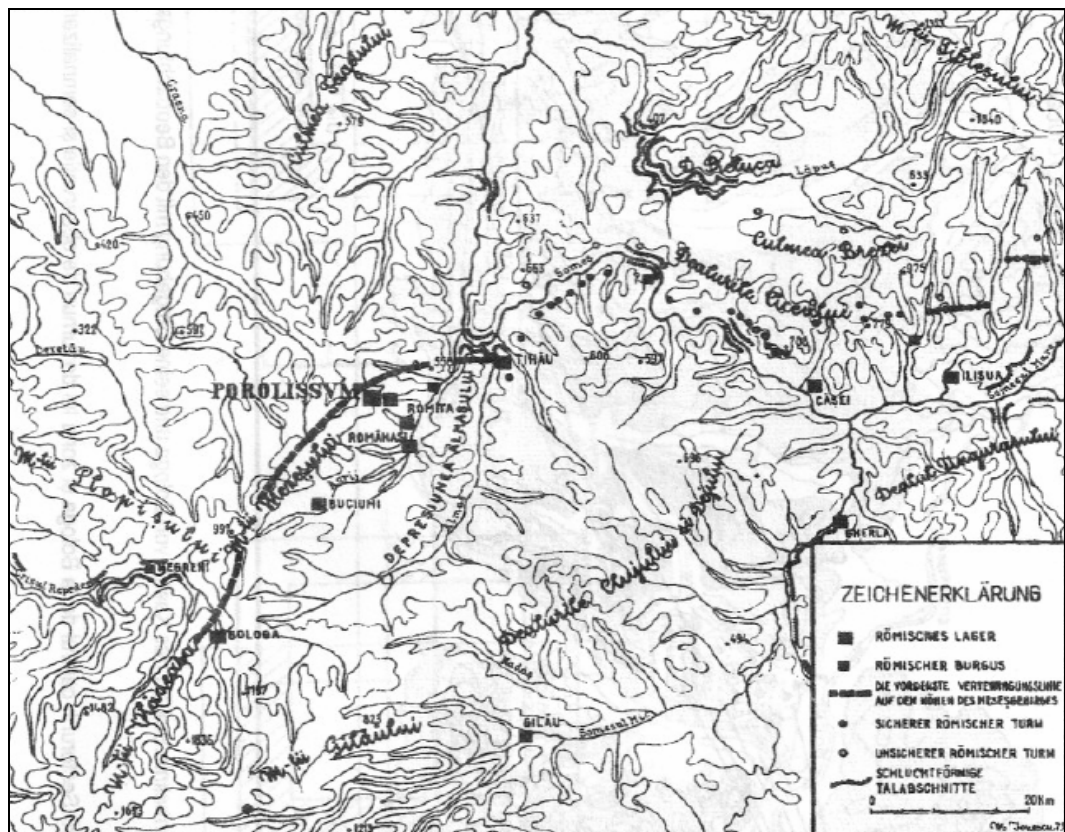
<sup>2</sup> *Dictionar of Contemporary Romanian Language*, The Scientific and Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, page 618

### THE HISTORY OF THE SUBJECT IN FOCUS

The military phenomenon in the study area started with the first human settlements which evolved with the modification of climate, socio-economic, sometimes political factors, but always favoured by the proper conditions that the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space offered and will always do.

In Antiquity, the system of fortifications was spread across all the Carpathian-Danubian-Pontic space, highly present in the study area. Almost all the settlements in this area were fortified with defensive ditches and large ramparts. As for example the ones in Andrid, Carei, Pir (Satu Mare county), Girișu de Criș, Otomani, Vășad (Bihar county), Gilău (Cluj county) and so on.

During the reign of Burebista, in Dacia spread the phenomenon of building mud and especially stone fortifications whose clear purpose was to protect its own population from the invasions of the enemies.



**Figure 1.** Map with a system of towers in the area of Meseș Mountains, drawn by I. Ferenczi (According to N. Gudea, *The times on the Meseș Mountains*, page 101)

Such fortifications were regularly set on the peaks of some dominant heights, being usually defended from three sides by steep slopes, hard if not impossible to be climbed. The only access section, binding the settlement with the neighboring plane or heights, was barred by a rampart of mud or crushed stone upon which it was usually raised a wood panel. Often the rampart was preceded by a defensive ditch without water, an illustrative example in favour of this argument being *Marca* (Sălaj county) on the “Fortress” height.

The fortified settlements formed a component of the defensive military system of the Getae-Dacian territories representing the local defensive effort highly organized for that time, being considered the military strengths of this state.

After the Roman conquest of Dacia, these established the Northern boundary of the Empire on the East Side of the study area, emphasizing the boundaries fortification. Thus, appeared a significant fortification system in the Western part of the study area, extended towards South-West, on the West side of the Apuseni Mountains, in the Crișuri Hallow.

*The setting of the fortifications* (according to castes and to themselves)

The fortifications are generally set in the highest places, especially on the entire Meseș peak being considered as a long, natural barrier.

The fortifications system was organized as a network in order to be observe and control all the movements inside the territory in front of the boundary, all the access possibilities and to quickly set in motion the entire defensive system, including the castes behind it. The display of the towers on the field assured a visual connection between them and the other elements, on one side, and between the entire observation system and castes, on the other hand.

The stone towers are divided into two groups: with quadrilateral plan (usually square) and with circular plan. The sizes are different in the case of both groups: small square towers (3-5 m), medium (5-7 m) and big (7-10 m); small circular towers (4-5 m), medium (5-7 m) or big (7-11 m).

During the period after the withdrawal of the Roman army and administration, the remaining population was forced to defend its existence and liberty, to develop its own civilization and its own method of social, political and military organization.

In the VIII-XIII centuries, the population had to face the invasion attempts of the Hungarians, Pechenegs, Uzis and Cumans.

The major battle that the historical sources mention was that of defending the voivodeship of Glad, Gelu and Menumorut against the Hungarian tribes who wished to consolidate their expansion towards East. Thus, under the rule of Tuhutum, the Hungarian army tried to invade the Transylvanian Hallow. Informed about the danger at the boundaries, Voivode Gelu gathered his army and quickly departed towards Meseș Gate, with the purpose to withstand the invaders in that place. The Hungarian troops, consisting in horsemen, rapidly crossed the mountains, thus, the two armies faced each other on the Almaș river. It was a dramatic encounter during which Voivode Gelu was outnumbered and then bravely fell in battle while trying to take cover in his fortress near Someș, to continue the defensive from there.

Another important event that took place in the study area was the Peasant Riot at Bobâalna, between 1437-1438. It was the first main riot of the peasants, both in Romania and in the Eastern and South-Eastern Europe, against social and national oppression, practically showing the stage of feudal reports and but also the tension between the oppressed and the oppressors, and the will of the peasantry to stop the aggravation of the material and social condition.

The riot bursted in the spring of 1437, the major cause being the abusive measures of the Catholic Bishop of Alba-Iulia, but also those of the Roman-Catholic Church. One of the reasons are the collection the parish quitrent for the

last three years in new coin, “heavier”, in a single installment, the increase in the number of working days of the peasants for the oppressing nobility, the ban of free relocation and also the parish sanctions pronounced against those that would or could not pay their rents, abuses which could no longer be endured.

The riot started in the North of Transylvania but soon spread towards *Sătmar* and *Szabolcs* regions, the representatives of the Transylvanian peasantry calling them to arms by indicating as gathering place Bobâlna.

The rebelled peasants headed towards Bobâlna hill (10 km north-west of Dej) which was referred to by the locals as Babdiu (693 m high). The place was well chosen because it represents the highest point in the Someșan Plateau, situated West of Someșul Mic, between Cluj and Dej, dominating all the other heights in the Someșan Plateau and offered the possibility to observe up to long distances (could be seen- in good weather conditions- Lapuș, Țibleș and even Rodnei Mountains, towards the Eastern Carpathians, and towards South-East the peaks of the Apuseni Mountains). On the tops of the chain of hills, around Bobâlna, it could be easily traced the approach of any enemy to the area where the rebelled forces gathered. This plateau presents itself as a natural fortress, hardly accessible from its three sides (as the fortified settlements from the Roman period) and which a brief defensive arrangement could stand for a true obstacle in case of a possible attack.

In the first part of the year 1437, the major strategies of the masses of peasants were the attacks by surprise of the castles and the punishment of their noblemen. As result of these striking attacks and the conditions of seeing their lands not worked, the noblemen built their own camp to press back. They chose as gathering place Căpîlna, situated approximately at 15 km North-West of Dej. Here, on a plateau on the right shore of Someș, referred to even today as Podul Curții, could be found a strong noble court around which the bands of noblemen from the Transylvanian counties gathered, as well as the army of Szekely leaders. At the end of June 1437, the noble army headed towards Bobâlna hill where the rebelled peasants were ready to fight. The armament of the noblemen was far more superior than that of the peasantry which also denotes optimism and faith in a quick victory.

The approach of the noble troops to the gathering place of the peasantry was made through the less steep part of Bobâlna height, from North-East. The peasant troops with a scarce armanent but lighter unleashed themselves upon the noblemen from the flanks of the march apparatus, like in a horseshoe, gradually tightening it between the Bobâlna and Peștera Valley, where was practically circled. The heavy noble army could not move at ease and could not attack with its full force in those tight and narrow places, while the light peasant troop gave striking blows. The noblemen faced the fact of being attacked both from front and flanks.

Defeated, the nobility had no choice but to bargain; in the end, they settled to an “agreement” sealed at Bobâlna and corroborated by the Cluj-Mănăștur Convent, in July 6<sup>th</sup>, 1437, mentioning to abolish the “unbearable difficulties and burdens”.

Fervent actions took place on both sides after this agreement. On one hand, the nobility reorganizes the forces and attracts at their side other classes financially superior (the upper clergy, the leaders of the Szekely and Transylvanian Saxons and the gentry), on the other hand the peasantry carries out activities of completing their numbers and ensuring the necessary food,

extending the area of riot towards West to Meseș Mountains and towards South to Aiud Fortress.

As a result of the above mentioned treaty, the noblemen, reorganized and strengthened with new forces, marched again against the rioters. The new confrontation between the two parties took place at Apatiu, towards Bistrița, near the monastery of this village, on a plateau under the vineyard, being as bloody as the one under Bobâlna hill. The noble army did not succeed to ensure the victory again and in consequence a new agreement was reached between the two parties at Apatiu and corroborated again at Cluj-Mănăstur, but this time the text of the agreement was more moderate than at the first agreement at Bobâlna.

At the end of 1437 the peasant riot entered a new phase. Maintaining the camp on Bobâlna hill was no longer possible because winter was approaching, the nurture was even more difficult to obtain as well as the acquisition of new people. The solution was to find shelter in a city fortified by walls, where the chances of resisting the enemy were bigger, Cluj giving the fighters the most advantages. Supported by the poorer classes from Cluj, the rioters entered in the fortress and united with the local groups of peasantry helped organizing the walls defensive. For three months Cluj was in the hands of the rioters. The troops of noblemen decided to siege the locality. In spite the brave resistance organized by the peasants and citizens, the noble forces managed to take one of the city's outskirts, at the end of the first decade of January 1438. An assault upon the fortress was rejected by the rioters. But receiving new back ups, especially from the Transylvanian Saxon Seats, the leaders of the aristocracy organized new attacks and towards the end of the month managed to take over the city and thus end this riot. The leaders of the peasant were judged at Turda and sentenced to death.

The battle at Guruslău (August 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1601) is among the most glorious heroic deeds in the area in focus.

The Romanian Ruler focused his army at Oradea, counting on approximately 10,000 soldiers and waiting further back up on behalf of General Basta. Mihai set his army in motion in the Oradea-Carei direction uniting in July, 9<sup>th</sup>, 1601, at Moftin (8 km East of Carei), with the army of Basta. Here also arrived the troops which the Imperial Commander was waiting for, namely 2,000 Silesian armoured horsemen.

In his turn, Sigismund Bathory started to gather his forces at Gherla having in mind the occupation of a central position from where he could quickly intercept the allied forces on whatever directions they might have engaged. Simultaneously, he requested military aid from the Gate, from Poland and Ieremia Movilă. Informed about the advancements of the troops of Mihai and Basta, Sigismund Bathory moves his troops from Gherla to Șimleu where came in his assistance a group of 12,000 Ottomans and Tatars sent by the Sultan, his soldiers exceeding 40,000 men, among which 18,000 horsemen. For artillery, Bathory had in possession 45 cannons, big and small. All this time, through advanced detachments, Mihai the Brave engaged into searching the area where the allied troops rested, seeking to obtain information and even engaged in some harassment conflicts with the safety subunits sent outside the camp by Mihai and Basta. Bearing in mind the fact that their enemy is relatively close and not to allow him to make the first strategic step, the two commanders decided to set their troops to march towards Șimleul Silvaniei and to attack at the right time the army of Bathory. But he discovered their intentions and advanced himself as

well, taking the lead in area of Guruslău village, where he occupied a dominant position on the South-Eastern shore of the stream with the same name. Adopting a battle strategy with most of the infantry units at the right side, the majority of the cavalry at the left flank and setting the artillery on the peak of a dominant hill on the right flank had in mind to seize the intention of Sigismund Bathory of resisting with the centre and right and engaging the mobile cavalry troops in maneuver actions against the flank of the enemy hoping in an easy victory.

The troops of Mihai the Brave and George Basta in the direction Moftin — Șimleul Silvaniei, faced the enemy in the afternoon of August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1601. After analyzing the situation they decided to set their troops in two lines on the South-Eastern slopes of the height of 269 m. Not far from the Guruslău streambed, on an advanced position, were set some subunits of pedestrians, framed by horsemen to cover their flanks. In the second line, set to such a distance not to be touched by the artillery of the enemy, occupied battle positions the gross of pedestrian and horsemen forces. At the center were the arquebusiers and the armoured cavalry, important crushing force, at the right Mihai the Brave and the mobile troops and at the left Basta with his own. The cannons of the army were placed partly in the front of the first line and the rest, most of them, in front of the main defensive line. Thus, resulted a genius apparatus, well set, able to assure a strong defense against the attacks of the enemy troops and to allow at the same slight force regroupings in order to charge back decisively.

The battle at Guruslău took place on the 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1601, around 9 am, through an exchange of artillery fires. The use of Bathory's cannons had little effect due to lack of precision. On the opposite, the artillery of Mihai the Brave and Basta, which was better arranged on the field and guided skillfully, struck with full force causing the enemy significant losses.

Sigismund Bathory ordered the first attack. The troops from the right side of his apparatus received the mission to cross the Guruslău stream and engage the left flank of the enemy. Under the pressure of a highly numbered enemy, the first line, slightly scarce, of Basta was forced to give in, reorganizing in order under the coverage of the fire of their own artillery, towards the gross of forces.

At the same time, the cavalry from the right flank of Sigismund Bathory's army received order to execute a maneuver of surprise on the opposite apparatus. Mihai the Brave thwarted the intent of the enemy engaging in this direction infantry and cavalry units which after bloody struggles succeeded in stopping his action. By 5 pm, the troops of Prince Bathory were stopped on the entire battlefield; their attack was crushed while a great deal of Mihai the Brave and Basta's troops were not yet engaged in battle. Thus were created proper conditions for them to be able to attack. In the decisive phase of the battle, the hard shielded cavalry from the troops of Basta executed a strong counter attack whose result was the penetration under the form of feather in the enemy apparatus and dividing the forces from its center. Another attack was made upon the troops on the right flank, taking them by surprise from East. However, the result of the battle was determined by the action conceived and carried out personally by Mihai the Brave. While the infantry from his troops caused losses to the opposite maneuver group, Mihai the Brave leading the cavalry executed a large maneuver through the meadow of Zalău valley, turning and dissembling the entire apparatus of Sigismund Bathory's army. The effect of such a coordinated action was decisive. Circling a significant part of the enemy forces, the constant attack of Mihai and Basta's pedestrians, horsemen and cannoneers

determined the victorious end of the Guruslău battle. Sigismund Bathory saved himself by running away while the rest of his army was destroyed through isolated battles which continued during the night. As a result of the victory at Guruslău, Mihai the brave had reasons to view his future with optimism. Defeating the army of Sigismund Bathory brought him the reign of Transylvania. He received news from Muntenia that the whole country rebelled and that Simion Movilă, although helped by the Polish and the Tatars, was driven away. A delegation of noblemen from Muntenia was already waiting at Cluj for the ruler.

Between 1600-1900 in the region of Someș Gate did not occur any other spectacular events to present further introspection.

During the First World War staff officers established an action hypothesis. The "Z" hypothesis had in view a bold conception about the preparation and execution of the strategic, operational-strategic and operational military actions. The superior Romanian Command had in focus strength and speed actions as in the war of movement. At the same time, they also had in mind to gain and harness the advantages of the conquered land.

A decisive blow was to be executed at the Someș Gate, at almost a month after declaring the mobilization, with the clear purpose of annihilating the most dangerous enemy forces; another decisive blow was to be taken in the direction Oradea, Debrețen in order to liberate the Romanian historical territories, West of Apuseni and to stop any enemy attempt to regain control over the Transylvanian redoubt.

Unfortunately, underestimating the possibility of the Central Powers to bring on short notice various troops on the Eastern front, they made such action hypotheses to remain at the state of merely goals. The Romanian army lost the element of surprise, receiving a pretty harsh reply, being practically forced to retreat to different intermediary lines, failing to face the enemy. Moreover, due to the fact that the Russian Empire left the war zone determined by the Red Revolution in October 1917, Romania was left without the promised support. Starting with 1919, the Romanian army switched to disband reservists and adopted the regular procedures of recruitment of the young in the army. This situation did not last for long as in 1933 dark times were in store for Europe with Adolf Hitler's leadership of Germany and Romania entering The Second World War.

After the victory over Hitler's army between the 23<sup>rd</sup>-31<sup>st</sup> August 1944, the Romanian army heroically managed to liberate the North-Western part of the country taken by Horthyst Hungary through the Vienna Dictate on the 30<sup>th</sup> August 1940. The 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> troops succeeded their operational maneuvers North of Middle Carpathians and West of the Occidentals.

The Supreme Soviet Command ordered its armies to cross the passes of the Middle Carpathians into the Transylvanian Plateau. On their way to the new battle line the Soviet divisions passed through the Carpathian cities and passes without being needed to fight hard as did the bigger units which tried to cross the Oriental Carpathians from East to West.

The decision of the political and military U.R.S.S. leadership to subordinate the Romanian army starting with the night of September 6<sup>th</sup>/7<sup>th</sup>, 1944 also meant significant changes in the strategic plan of the national military command regarding the liberation of the North-Western part of the country, this being practically excluded from any military operations. Imbedded in the Ukrainian Front 2 apparatus, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> Romanian armies created together with a similar and bigger Soviet unity, a group of armies leaded by the commander of the bigger Soviet Unity.







system of the military actions carried out in the mountains prove them to be one of the core elements of the geographic-military and tactical-operational analysis undertaken by the military commands both in time of peace and war. Knowing in detail their characteristics, realistically portraying their consequences and implications in the preparation and execution in the mountains allow the commanders to take the most clear decisions and to establish the necessary measures to carry them out.

**THE AREA OF STUDY**

**Couloir on the Someș Valley** can be traced in Sălaj county, starting at Căpîlna and ending at Mirșid (near Zalau), having a length of 80 km. It comes along the valley of the Someș river up to Jibou, then on the valley of the Apa Sărată stream up to South of Firminiș, separating Ciceu Hills (in depth Brezei Peak), Boiului Plateau (in depth Prisnel Peak) and Silvaniei Hills (on the Northern part of the pass) of the Someșan Plateau and Meses Mountains on the Southern side, after which continues for 3 more km towards West and ends at Mirșid.

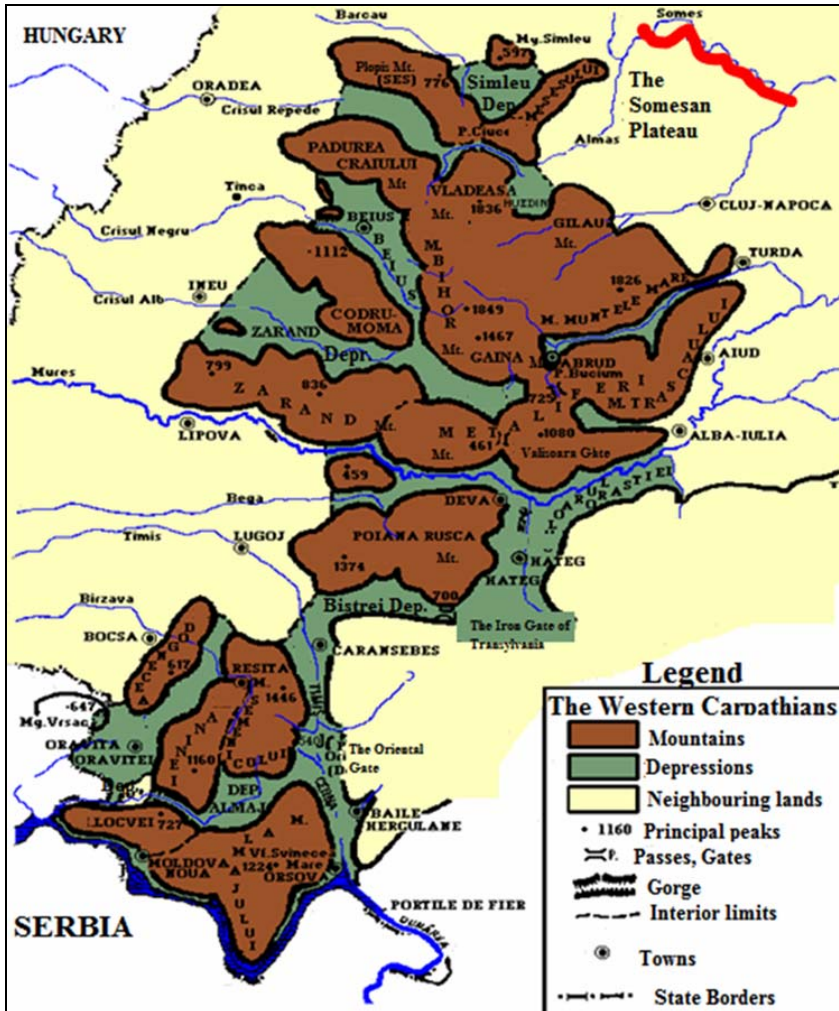


Figure 3. Someș Gate

The main defensive direction is Satu Mare – Dej which later evolved in Cluj Napoca – Tîrgu Mureș – Brașov (thus the main important cities in Transylvania) or Bistrița Năsăud, to joint further with the passes in the Oriental Carpathians.

The pass is crossed by the national road 1 C, from Căpîlna up to 2 km West to Perii Vadului locality, then from here to Mirșid on the national road 1 H which mainly follows the course of the Someș river on its right shore, between Căpîlna and Ciocmani and from here on the left shore of the river up to Jibou, from where it continues up to Mirșid following a part of the trail along the Apa Sărată stream.

The road is in construction almost on its entire length.

When finished, the connection would allow the passing of all types of military convoy with an average speed of 30 km/hour, on both directions simultaneously, ensuring a traffic capacity of 250 vehicles per hour.

The area surrounding this pass is covered with dense woods which allow the soldiers and the battle equipment to be hidden, using both the personal material and the ones in the area. However, a good shelter can be also obtained by making use of the mines galleries at Surduc and Babeni.

Putting in use the maneuver over the Someș river, using both of the connections situated either to the North or South of the pass, is possible by crossing the Someș on the bridges at Rus, Ileanda, Letea - Lozna, Ciocmani.

**In case the pass is closed (blocked) it can be proceed as follows:**

**Through the Northern part of the pass, a detour can be made on the direction** Tîrgu Lăpuș, Șomcuța Mare, Ulmeni, Benesat, Cehu-Silvaniei, Crișeni on a distance of 135 km. The route presents no difficulties regarding the relocation of the unities and bigger tactical unities equipment, the average speed being of 20 km/hour, with a traffic capacity of 198 vehicles per hour (4,752 vehicles in 24 hours).

**Through the Northern part of the pass, a detour can be made on the direction** Dej, Bobîlna, Pânticeu, Sărata, Voivodeni, Hida, Românași, Zalău 2 km West of Crișeni, on a distance of almost 110 km.

The route allows the circulation in both directions of any type of technical convoys, with an average speed also of 20 km/hour, with a capacity almost equal as in the previous situation.

In case some sections of the pass are blocked, the routes remain mainly the same, with small changes and junctions between certain communal or county roads, but which decrease the traffic speed and the capacity.

**The transport by train** can be made on the 400 main railway, Dej – Jibou direction with 412 railway branch Zalău – Satu Mare. It is a simple railway, with normal gauge, unelectrified, having a length of 71 km. The loading/unloading possibilities on/from the railway can be made in the 10 stations (trading halts) where exist loading/unloading ramps, with lengths between 10 and 225 m, all lateral ramps except the one in Gîlgău which is in an advanced state of deterioration (approximately 75 %). The maximum traffic capacity on this main railway is of 7, 2 tones per meter or 20 tones per axle. The consolidation works carried out in this section allow oversized transports with maximal weights of 20, 5 tones/axle.

Along the pass, the railway crosses but once the Someș river on the railway bridge at Ciocmani, with a length of 160, 60 m, width of 5, 64 m, made of concrete and metal, 8 m above the Someș river.

## CONCLUSION

The pass crosses over a wide area of hills and plateaux with relatively small altitudes (the axis of the pass marking the Northern limit of the Occidental Carpathians), being a favourable route to carry out battle actions, making possible the use of all types of weapons both from the Transylvanian Plateau towards Tisa Plain and vice versa.

The actions that a possible enemy could take from West would probably focus on the conquest, in the first instance, of some objectives such as the passes and the mandatory passing points (on communications, communications nodes and orographic), the main economic objectives (hydro dams and their installations, tourism and recreation bases, mining and forestry exploitations, and so on), control points and broadcasting centers.

In the case of the pass on the Someș Valley, a successful attack of the enemy may give him the possibility to reach the Transylvanian Plateau where he can unleash his forces and means and carry out successfully the actions on the important directions (previously mentioned) ending with the conquest of the main cities in Transylvania and the resources laying here.

The importance of the pass on the Someș Valley resides in the fact that along it, can act forces up to two big tactical unities, with the possibility to force themselves upon the river North of Jibou and then to give the main blow towards Dej.

In case the enemy decides to act in such a manner, the river Someș, in the section South and North-West to Dej, can enable the alignment of a large unit whose conquest may open new directions leading towards the main political and economic centers in Transylvania but also to the execution of a good maneuver in the flank and behind the entire defensive apparatus in the Apuseni Mountains. In order to strengthen the attack, the enemy can use tactical air landing at the entrance in the pass (Jibou) or at the its exit in order to block the defensive armies towards the front.

The defense of the pass can be organized first of all even at the entrance on a strong operational line which crosses Baia Mare, Jibou, Zalău, Ciucea. Another defensive line, of same importance, can be organized at the exit of the pass, on the Eastern shore of the Someș river, crossing Năsăud, Beclean, Dej, Bonțida, Apahida. The enemy which tries to enter the pass can be crushed by executing counter attacks with reserve soldiers between Jibou and Zalău and in case the pass is conquered by reserves set East of Someș in the direction of Dej, Zalău or Cluj, Jibou, in order for the defense to be reorganized with a line at the entrance in the pass.

Occupying and taking hold of this can lead, with the shift of power on the local level, to its transformation into a strong starting base to the offensive towards West in order to liberate the territory occupied by the enemy in this part of the country.

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