

# A MODEL FOR THE SOCIETY. ON THE CENTENARY OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR AND OF THE NATIONAL GREAT UNION: MIHAIL V. GHEORGHIU (A CASE STUDY)

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## **Abstract:**

*In our work we aim to present the life and activity of one of the hundreds of thousands of heroes who played an active role in the Great War of 1916-1918, namely a case study on Mihail V. Gheorghiu, an impressive personality from Săgeata Village, Buzău County, that may still be considered a vivid example in nowadays context of celebrating the centenary of the event. He participated in almost all the essential moments of this war: Gheorghiu was on the Transylvanian front when the Carpathians were crossed in 1916, he fought in Dobrogea, then in West Wallachia, as well as in battle to defend the city of Bucharest. In the summer of 1917, he took part in the combats from the heroic perimeter Mărăști, Mărășești and Oituz, was captured as a prisoner and detained in a camp in Germany. After having returned to his country, Gheorghiu played an active role in the battles from Galați area, as well as in the defense of the eastern border that was engaged on the Dniester river, where he fought permanently in the first line and proved remarkable deeds of heroism. During the interwar period, Mihail V. Gheorghiu got involved in erecting a beautiful monument to the WW I heroes in his native village and, since 2010, the main street in Săgeata has been bearing his name.*

**Keywords:** *First World War, Mihail V. Gheorghiu, monument, administrative decision.*

## **1. Introduction**

The First World War was an event of major importance in the history of mankind, with notable repercussions in the history of Europe and of the world. As it is very well-known, this event had a special significance in the history of the Romanian society as well. Romania entered the conflict in 1916, with the well-defined and declared purpose of liberating the territories that were at that time under foreign domination [1]. In 1918, after a sinuous journey between heroism and grandeur on the one hand, and tragedy, despair and humiliation, on the other, Romania was in the end in the victorious party, and, therefore, Bessarabia, Bukovina and Transylvania united with their motherland [2].

By uniting all these provinces, there was fulfilled the long-lasting national ideal, due to the efforts and sacrifice of hundreds of thousands of Romanian soldiers. In the

year of celebrating the centenary of the Great Union, and in the context of the general tribute paid to the WW I heroes, we focus our attention, through a case study, on one of the hundreds of thousands of known or unknown soldiers who made the national ideal possible. We therefore highlight and honour the life and heroic deeds of lieutenant Mihail V. Gheorghiu who participated in almost all the military operations of the Romanian Army during the First World War. After the end of the war, he also got involved in erecting an imposing monument dedicated to the heroes in his native village. We would like to mention the fact that the information related to his participation in the military operations has never been published before and was found during our investigation of the Romanian Military Archives located in Pitești.

## **2. Mihail V. Gheorghiu: Biographical data**

Mihail Gheorghiu was born in 1889 in Săgeata village, Buzău county, in a family of wealthy peasants. After graduating from high school in Romania, he attended Mining Academy of Berlin for two years and a half. He began his military career as a soldier, during his service in 1910, later on becoming a corporal and a sergeant. In the context of the summoning during the Balkan wars of 1912-1913, he got the military rank of plutonier and sub lieutenant in reserve. In 1916, he became an active force in the army, obtaining the rank of lieutenant. There followed the ranks of captain in 1919, of major in 1828, and that of lieutenant colonel - in 1938. He was retired for old age in November 1940, but was again convoked during the World War II operations, when he carried out various military activities behind the front. On June 15, 1944, he was definitely retired from the army for medical reasons. He was married twice and had a son from his first marriage [3].

## **3. Mihail V. Gheorghiu during the First World War**

Mihail Gheorghiu got distinguished especially during the First World War, when he participated in almost all military operations held on the national territory, deploying the whole campaign from 1916, by crossing the Carpathians, fighting in Dobrogea, participating in the defence of Bucharest and later, in the summer of 1917, in the fights from Mărășești area, where he was taken prisoner by the German troops.

His record of service, stored at the military archives in Pitești, charts that he took part in the fighting from Transylvania, starting with 16 August 1916 in Vama Buzău area, where he “effectively contributed to the capture of an entire enemy battalion”[4]. After nearly two weeks, Mihail Gheorghiu fought on the front in Dobrogea, participating in the entire campaign from this region.

For this stage of Gheorghiu’s military career, his qualifying sheet records the following: “He looks well, he is healthy and very resistant. Therefore, he may participate in the campaign for a long time. He rides well.” His superior estimated that Mihail Gheorghiu knew military regulations, as well as the secrets of the machine gun, which got him good results. He was considered in the same record as being “intelligent, zealous and conscious in his service”; “during battles, he has always been at the forefront of the machine-gun unit”. All assessments throughout the period 15 August to 31 October 1916 are extremely appreciative, Mihail Gheorghiu being praised equally for his military and administrative skills, dealing with his subordinates “fairly and impartially” and taking good care of the horses [5].

After Dobrogea stage, there followed the campaigns in East Oltenia and West Wallachia where he took part, on 12 November, in the battle from Drăgoești-Verguleasa on river Olt and, on 23 November 1916, in Chitila fighting, as the commander of Company III.

The fourth stage of “Mihail Gheorghiu’ war” is set on the front of Southern Moldavia, where he participated, from 25 July 1917 to 1 August 1917, in the fightings from Străjescu Forest, Cosmești Bridge and Mărășești where he vanished [6].

His record of service from the period 31 October 1916 - 1 August 1917 maintains the same laudatory assessments. During the winter 1916-1917, Mihail Gheorghiu attended special schools and prepared his company for the battles to come, taking care in a rather “fatherly” manner of his people, horses and materials. He was conscientious and impassioned. There followed the stage of Nămolosa, Mărășești and Doaga. “On the night of 24/25, he was noted due to the night attack and conquest of Doaga village, by going in the first line with his machine guns.” His heroic deeds continued and “he was distinguished on 25 July, when he managed to reject three German attacks with machine-gun fire, to completely destroy two Prussian regiments, 453 and 454 respectively, while

fiercely defending Doaga village”. Nevertheless, Mihail Gheorghiu was taken prisoner in the context of these fierce battles. In his qualifying sheet it is noted: “He took part in the attack on 29 July and in the defensive battles on 30 – 31 July and 1 August, when, surrounded by superior enemy forces, he was taken prisoner”. The concluding paragraph of his sheet summarizes his deeds as follows: “Throughout the campaign, this officer proved brave, would fight in the front line, permanently encouraging his soldiers to fight and causing important losses to the enemies in all battles” [7].

His dedication and heroism during the war were rewarded with numerous medals. [8]. At his return home, he was reintegrated into the army and his military career continued on a trajectory somewhat ordinary after the end of World War I. It was not a spectacular career, with its ups and downs, sometimes dramatic ones, with several failures on personal level that severely affected his professional career. Nevertheless, Mihail Gheorghiu is to be remembered as a worthy man-at-arms that shone during the First World War through heroism. In this respect, we consider eloquent another appreciation made by his superiors in the qualifying sheet: “he impetuously fought for the achievement of national ideals” [9].

After being detained in Germany, Gheorghiu returned to his home country and was reintegrated into the army where he played an active role in the battles from Galați area, as well as in the defense of the eastern border from the Dniester river against the Bolsheviks. His military evolution continued, on a rather common trajectory after the end of the First World War military operations. Nevertheless, it was not spectacular anymore, it had ups and downs, sometimes dramatic ones, with some failures on the personal level that seriously affected his professional career as well.

#### **4. Mihail V. Gheorghiu and the Heroes Monument from his home village**

In the interwar period, Mihail Gheorghiu had another brilliant moment of his life, this time in the sphere of public activity, namely that of coordinating the efforts to erect in his birthplace a monument dedicated to the heroes of the World War I. The idea to erect such a monument in Săgeata village emerged in 1923 and belonged to C. Cazan, a primary school teacher that would later become a deputy and left the village. Therefore, the idea did not materialize immediately and the efforts were resumed in 1928. At that

moment, there was constituted a committee headed by Major Mihail Gheorghiu [10], highly esteemed in the village, as everyone knew he was “himself a hero in the war of national unification” [11].

The committee was made up of local notables: the mayor, the priest, the secretary of the commune and other village leaders. An intense fundraising activity was initiated and in the village there were organized various public cultural activities, parties, proms, collections and so forth. To this public effort, there joined various central and local institutions, such as The Ministry of Education, Buzău Prefecture, Buzău Mayor House, “The Sons Defenders of the Homeland” Society, as well as various personalities in the region.

The actual construction of the monument began in 1934 [12] and was completed in 1939 [13]. A very beautiful monument was erected, a monument that exceeded what had been previously considered to be the condition of the rural universe. Created by the famous sculptor Jon Jalea, the monument was cast in bronze in Bucharest and represents a life-size soldier in lunge position attack, with his hand clutching the gun with a bayonet and his gaze fixing the enemy. Body position denotes strength, boldness and patriotism.

The 5.5-metre monument represents a very harmonious compositional complex which comprises a platform and a pedestal. The hard rock platform is composed of three rows of steps and supports a three-part good quality stone pedestal. The base body is solid and allegorically engraved with the army’s insignia, the central body is rectangular and slender, decorated with marble medallions, whereas the upper body, smaller and flattened, is highlighted by a beautiful belt and stands as the base for the bronze statue [14].

This monument, located on the church perimeter, in a central, visible place, on the main road has always been a mark of reverence, respect and admiration for all the inhabitants of Săgeata village. Its educational valences transcend time and maintain their viability, becoming perennial: “there is no better and more beautiful school for the patriotic education of this village youth than this monument which will always speak the language of light and mystery about their parents and siblings with rotting bones in the halo of their glory” [15].

## **5. A decision of the local public administration: Mihail V. Gheorghiu Street**

The monument and the deeds of Major Mihail Gheorghiu have permanently remained in the collective memory of local inhabitants. On 29 January 2010, the Council of Săgeata Village decided to name the streets of this village [16] and the main street that runs through the entire locality was named after Mihail Gheorghiu. This decision represented a formal recognition of the person to head the efforts of erecting a Heroes Monument in Săgeata, and of the soldier whose heroism was noted throughout the First War World' military operations.

## **6. Conclusions**

As a conclusion, the actions of Lieutenant - Colonel Mihail V. Gheorghiu were trully remarkable. He was both a hero of the First World War and a personality noted in public life, mainly due to his admirable effort to erect a Heroes Monument in his hometown. Mihai Gheorghiu has constantly enjoyed appreciation from his fellow villagers due to his intellectual formation, elite family environment and to his wartime heroism. His involvement in the erection of the Heroes Monument in Săgeata transformed him into a local personality, status oficialized in 2010 when his name was assigned to the main street of the homevillage.

One is to highlight the fact that this monument was erected due to the involvement of a man who made war and was distinguished due to his heroism, who saw the fragile boundary between life and death, had the necessary determination and could appreciate better than others the true value of a monument that would pay tribute to the ones dying for their homeland.

By erecting such a monument Mihail Gheorghiu showed a profound civic spirit and became a very beautiful example for his contemporaries and a benchmark for the descendents. From a brave hero of the WW I, also known as the war of national unification, he has become over time an important personality of his native village.

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