

## 22 JUNE 1941 – HISTORICAL ROOTS OF A MEMORABLE EVENT

**Florin ȘANDRU\***, Ph.D. Candidate  
The National Institute for the Study of Totalitarianism –  
The Romanian Academy

*According to the Romanian and universal historiography, the document of 22 June 1941 marked the beginning of the first Romanian-Russian war. The present article aims to emphasize such a conclusion, reviewing all the aggressive, hegemonic or annexational actions of Tsarist Russia and mostly of Soviet Russian (the Soviet Union, as of December 1922) directed against the Romanian historical territories and the Romanian national state. In the light of those mentioned, Romania's joining the war effort of Germany against the USSR, in June 1941, appears not as a historical accident, but as the outcome of prolonged states of suspicions and latent conflict.*

**Keywords:** foreign policy; military relations; alliances; offensive; defensive.

Roughly speaking, we might say that the date 22 June 1941 marked the beginning of the first Romanian-Russian war in history.

In fact, the relations between the two Christian-Orthodox peoples had not always been friendly. If, in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, against a rather post-medieval than pre-modern general background, there had been powerful Russophile boyar parties, in the next century, as the Romanian national and social emancipation movements emerged, the relations with the mighty neighbour from the East can be described as a mixture of hostility and fear<sup>1</sup>.

Meanwhile, the Romanians had had the chance to feel that Russian occupation/domination was the most dangerous of the rules of the neighbouring expansionist empires: Russia had neither the tolerance and indolence of Muslim Turkey, nor the ability to emancipate of Catholic Habsburg Austria. For Moldavian Romanians in Bessarabia, as, previously, for their brothers across the Dniester, religious communion with Russians became

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\* e-mail: [i\\_am\\_true\\_soul@yahoo.com](mailto:i_am_true_soul@yahoo.com)

<sup>1</sup> *Istoria românilor (Tratat academic)*, vol VII, T. 1 and 2, Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2003, passim.

an instrument and a factor of denationalization<sup>2</sup> contributing, paradoxically, not to facilitating friendship but to deepening the gap between the two nations.

Circumstantially, Russia was on the same side of the barricade as the initiators of the ideas of Romanian national unity in 1857, 1877 and 1916. Every time, however, the euphoric phase in the bilateral relations was followed by a bitter disappointment. Dissatisfied with the unifying and modernizing course of events during Al. I. Cuza's reign, Russia encouraged, after the removal of the "Union Prince", the secessionist movements of Iași in April 1866<sup>3</sup>. Following the War of Independence, an exchange of Romanian territories (Southern Bessarabia for Dobrudja) was required, which was rather disadvantageous at the time, as was the attempted military occupation of "Little Romania" then<sup>4</sup>. During World War I, Russia proved a difficult ally; its troops did not act properly in the 1916 campaign<sup>5</sup>, and the next year they fell into revolutionary turmoil.

After the Bolshevik Revolution, new reasons of dispute interfered in the Romanian-Russian/Romanian-Soviet relations as a result of Russia's not acknowledging Bessarabia's Union with the country, seizing the National Bank Treasury and, above all, perhaps, because the government of Kremlin now understood to drape their hegemonic and expansionist tendencies with a rather perverse ideology which, starting from the utopian ideal of absolute equality among people, impugned religion, family, property and eluded the application of civil rights and liberties on a large scale, promoting genocide and terror as governing methods<sup>6</sup>.

The duplicity of the Soviet state manifested in the international political arena as well. On the one hand, Lenin and his followers vehemently supported the principles of self-determination and general disarmament, but, on the other, they encouraged, in secret and discretion or indirectly, the revisionist forces, from Mussolini to Hitler, hoping for the outbreak of a war among the other great European powers, a conflagration which would result in the Soviet state's gaining the maximum of advantages<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> Iulian Fruntaru, *O istorie etnopolitică a Basarabiei 1812-2002*, Cartier Publishing House, Chișinău, 2002, pp. 6-197.

<sup>3</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *O istorie sinceră a poporului român*, fourth edition, , Enciclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, pp. 222-223.

<sup>4</sup> George Ungureanu, *Problema Cadrilaterului în contextul relațiilor româno-bulgare (1919-1940)*, Istros Publishing House, Brăila, 2009, pp. 34-37

<sup>5</sup> Constantin Kirițescu, *Istoria războiului pentru întregirea României*, second edition, in three volumes, School House Publishing, Bucharest, 1922, vol. I-II, passim.

<sup>6</sup> Lucian Boia, *Mitologia științifică a comunismului*, Bucharest, Humanitas Publishing House, 1998, passim.

<sup>7</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *Între Hitler și Stalin. România și pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov*, Danubius Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, pp. 5-34, Mihai Retegan, *În balanța forțelor. Alianțe militare românești interbelice*, Signs Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 41, as well as Viktor Suvorov's attempt in four volumes, "Icebreaker".

Millions of Soviet citizens, mostly Ukrainian peasants, were sacrificed on the 'lay' altar of the Red Army, being literally killed by starvation, as the investments were mainly directed towards the army<sup>8</sup> (we should compare this with the current policy of the north-Korean state which, fortunately, lacks the economic and demographic potential of former USSR).

Romania's dissatisfaction with the Munich agreement (29/30 September 1938) was seriously weakened by the fact that the USSR had been excluded from taking the decision, which, essentially, did not violate the ethnical principle upon which "Great Romanian" had been created<sup>9</sup>.

A few months later, though, Hitler's Germany broke the ethnical principle by occupying Bohemia and Moravia, hence the illusion of a consensus among the Great Western Powers vanished. This created a very favourable situation for the Soviet Union that speculated it to the fullest, negotiating with both the Anglo-French bloc and Germany and reaching an agreement with the latter, in August 1939, at the expense of small and medium-sized states spread between the Baltic Sea and the Black Sea, including Romania.

The tragedy of Great Romania, which occurred in the hot summer of 1940, was triggered by the Soviet factor, for not only did the eastern giant hastily and violently occupy a sixth of our national territory<sup>10</sup>, but it also backed the Hungarian and Bulgarian claims to Romania, fostering, at the border imposed, an atmosphere of undeclared war.

"After all, we could have risked a war with our Hungarian and Bulgarian neighbours whom we could have defeated provided we had been left alone by the USSR"<sup>11</sup>, wrote Mihail Manoilescu, minister of foreign affairs in Ion Gigurtu's government, in the summer of 1940. This unique and supreme requirement was far from being met. Molotov's statement of 1 August 1940, according to which: "Moscow wanted the relations with Romania to become normal"<sup>12</sup>, remained mere propaganda. Border incidents provoked by Soviet border guards, that had been ordered by their commanding officers, seemed to be never-ending<sup>13</sup>.

<sup>8</sup> A terrifying but deeply realistic view of these events in the documentary "The soviet story", made in 2008 and posted on the website of Jurnal TV Moldova.

<sup>9</sup> Rebecca Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany, 1936-40/Politica României față de Germania (1936-1940)*, translated by Cristina Aboboaiie, Iași, Editura Polirom, 2003, pp. 61-62.

<sup>10</sup> Mircea Mușat, *Drama României Mari (1940)*, Fundația România Mare Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, pp.81-82.

<sup>11</sup> Mihail Manoilescu, *Urmarea la memoriile mele. Dictatul de la Viena: iulie-august 1940*, edition by Valeriu Dinu, Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 1991, p. 62.

<sup>12</sup> "Apud Universul", LVII, 2 august 1940, p. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Volume I of the trilogy of documents *Armata română de la ultimatum la dictat* (coordinators: Florica Dobre, Vasilica Manea, Lenuța Nicolescu), Europa Nova Publishing House, Bucharest, 2000, doc. 108, pp. 267-269.

Bulgaria was promised support to occupy the entire Dobrudja, the two Slavic states intending to make territorial junction with the Danube Delta<sup>14</sup>, and a number of Soviet, Hungarian (Count Csaki's memoirs) and Italian (Ciano's journal) sources complete the information regarding a Soviet-Hungarian agreement with the clear purpose of achieving, in August 1940, the common border on the Eastern Carpathians<sup>15</sup>. In Sofia and, ultimately, in Budapest, the hostility towards our country was undermined by the circumspection and fears of the USSR. Granting territorial benefits to Hungary and Bulgaria at the expense of Romania, in the summer of 1940, and explicit guarantees for the remaining territory to the latter by the Vienna Award (29/30 August 1940), Hitler succeeded in impounding Soviet expansion in south-eastern Europe.

Thus, we do not exaggerate if we say that the threads of the Vienna Dictate lead to Kremlin, which, of course, does not absolve Hitler from the monstrous crimes against peace and humanity.

The act of 30 August 1940, "especially Germany's guarantees granted to Romania" after the submission of northern Transylvania and southern Dobrudja, deeply displeased the Soviet Union.

A conversation between Schullenburg and Molotov is illustrative in this sense, the diplomatic civilities hardly masking the growing disbelief between the two partners. (Molotov: "Why did you guarantee for Romania?! You knew we did not plan to attack this country!" Schullenburg: "That is precisely why we did, because we knew you did not plant to attack Romania, so it shouldn't bother you!")<sup>16</sup>.

The USSR's attitude towards Romania remained, practically, just as hostile, in autumn 1940, when several holms of the Danube Delta were occupied<sup>17</sup>. On the other hand, to Hitlerian offers of cooperation against the British Empire, Molotov did not let himself be inveigled with India, Persia, raising the issue of Finland and the Balkans, including by reaffirming its claims to southern Bukovina, in November 1940<sup>18</sup>.

As the Romanian-German alliance became stronger, the USSR abandoned the offensive attitude in favour of one of expectation and even in favour of diplomatic attempts, later on, in the spring of 1941. The Soviet

<sup>14</sup> G. Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-360, 365.

<sup>15</sup> Apud M. Dogaru, Gh. Zbucea, *O istorie a românilor de pretutindeni*, D.C. Promoțiuni Publishing House, Bucharest, 2004, p. 12.

<sup>16</sup> M. Manoilescu, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

<sup>17</sup> *Armata română...*, vol. cit., doc.121, pp. 300-304.

<sup>18</sup> Barbara Jelavich, *History of the Balkans: 20th Century / Istoria Balcanilor*, vol. II – sec. XX, posted by Ion Ciupercă, translated by Eugen Mihai Avădanei, Iași, European Institute, 2000, pp. 364-365.

Union watched, with satisfaction, the disturbances in Romania known as “the legionary rebellion” and, after Antonescu’s victory, the Communist Party tried to assimilate former legionnaires confused by the events<sup>19</sup>, a strategy fully employed after 23 August 1944.

Finally, the spring of 1941 brought along the USSR’s diplomatic attempts towards Romania and first of all the discussion between Vyshinsky and Gafencu, of 8 April 1941, during which the Soviet representative made a rather equivocal reference to satisfying several Romanian “territorial claims”<sup>20</sup>. In the light of the general and long-term goals of the USSR in Europe, we consider the assumption according to which Moscow was testing the solidity of the Berlin-Bucharest relation in anticipation of a near conflict as highly probable.

In conclusion, the act of 22 June 1941 was not only Romania’s answer to the ultimatums of June 1940 but, even if only symbolically, it represented a response to all Russian invasions which marked Romanian modernity and a refusal to believe in the promises and word of Bolsheviks.

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<sup>19</sup> Florin Müller, *Statul național legionar*, in “Istoria Românilor (Tratat Academic), vol. IX, Enciclopedic Publishing House, Bucharest, 2008, pp. 96-97.

<sup>20</sup> Florin Constantiniu, *1941 – Hitler, Stalin și România*, Enciclopedic Universe Publishing House, Bucharest, 2002, pp.171-174.