

THE OCCUPATION OF BESSARABIA AND BUKOVINA (27-28 JUNE 1940) IN THE CONTEXT OF THE ROMANIAN-SOVIET RELATIONS

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The present paper relies on special works and collections of recently published documents and highlights the importance of the date of 28 June 1940, starting from the entire evolution of the Romanian-Soviet relations, before and after World War II. The underlying idea of the paper is that the occupation of north-eastern Romania, in June 1940, was only a part of a more complex plan of the USSR to gain control over the entire Balkan-Pontic space. As a result of this conduct, Romania's hostility legitimately grew, our country seeking Germany's protection in the face of the Soviet danger.

Keywords: agreement; border; diplomatic relations; interests; aggression.

Throughout the entire interwar period, Romanian-Soviet relations were encumbered with the so-called "Bessarabian issue", that is non-acknowledgment by Soviet Russia (the USSR, as of December 1922) of Bessarabia's union with the Country, of the right to self-determination of the Romanian population from Bessarabia.

In 1920-1921, the Romanian government had the chance to obtain, from the Soviets, the explicit recognition of the border on the Dniester, in exchange for renouncing the Treasury. Considering that the Treasury could no longer be recovered, with few exceptions, rejecting the Soviets' offers in 1920-1921 was a mistake of the Romanian diplomacy¹, even though, most likely, the Soviets would have broken, at a some point, the signature, as we very well know it happened many times.

After 1922, the USSR refused any categorical official recognition of Bessarabia's joining the Romanian state, offering, at most, intricate formulas

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¹ Octavian Țâcu, *Problema Basarabiei și relațiile sovieto-române în perioada interbelică (1919-1939)*, Chișinău, International Prut Publishing House, 2004, pp. 63-106.

of bracketing the territorial dispute, in exchange for subordinating the Romanian foreign policy. Thus, in 1933-1936 (during the negotiations between Titulescu and Litvinov), the USSR did not explicitly abandon its territorial claims, the province between the Prut and the Dniester being included, in various official Soviet propagandistic materials, within the Soviet borders². The real Soviet plans came into the open in 1937, when the Soviet Union, though allegedly animated by the most peaceful intentions, refused to conclude a non-aggression pact with Romania on the basis of the territorial *status quo*, suggesting, instead, a pact of mutual assistance, modelled on the Soviet-Mongolian one³.

The exacerbation of tensions among the Great Western Powers (England, France, Germany, Italy) allowed the USSR to assert themselves as a hegemonic power in the east of the old continent, which was recorded by the additional secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in article 3. A careful reading shows that the demarcation of spheres of influence of Germany and the USSR in south-eastern Europe was quite ambiguous. If, in Poland's case, there was a clear mention of the Narew-Vistula-San line, article 3 of the Secret additional protocol is formulated as follows: "With regard to South-eastern Europe attention is called by the Soviet side to its interest in Bessarabia. The German side declares its *complete political disinterestedness in the areas*."⁴. Therefore, the Germans' disinterest was merely political, Berlin was keeping a leeway in the economic area, while the plural "the areas" opened possibilities for the USSR to claim other south-eastern territories, other than Bessarabia, as well, maybe as far as Constantinople and the Straits.

The seizure of Bessarabia was a very cautiously and thoroughly prepared operation of the Soviets, in the famous Stalinist style, the dictator from Kremlin not being willing to risk anything. So long as the Soviet Union focused its attention on other cardinal and intra-cardinal points, the Soviet diplomats sought to temper the Romanians' fears, to lull the vigilance of Romania decision-makers so that, when considered opportune, our country should be as isolated and unprepared as possible.

On 17 September 1939, under the pretext of defending the life and property of the Polish citizens of Ukrainian and Byelorussian ethnic origins, who were the major population in the east of interwar Poland, the Red Army

² *Istoria României în date*, coordinated by Dinu C. Giurescu, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing House, 2003, p. 686.

³ Ion M. Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus (1924-1947)*, Bucharest, Albatros Publishing House, 2003, pp. 140-145.

⁴ Florin Constantiniu, *Între Hitler și Stalin. România și Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov*, Bucharest, Danubius Publishing House, 1991, pp. 65-66.

crossed the Polish-Soviet border established on 18 March 1921 in Riga. On this occasion, the USSR assured Romania of their "neutrality"⁵, which was a strange word considering that the Romanian state was not at war with any other state and the official Soviet communiqué of 18 September contained the periphrasis "the Dniester River, which represents our border with Romania"⁶, after two decades during which the Soviets had used, when referring to the Dniester line, vague phrases such as "demarcation line", etc. Moreover, in order to temper the Romanians' apprehensions, the Soviet diplomat Kukolev assured the Romanian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Grigore Gafencu, during their meeting on 8 December 1939, of the Soviet government's benevolence and understanding⁷. Less than 10 days before, war had started in Finland, which would last longer than Soviets had expected owing to objective natural conditions and the Finnish heroic resistance. However, there was a slip of the Soviets and this materialized into the publication (and later retraction) of an article titled "The Imperialist War and Romania" written by Boris Stefanov. The article published in "Komunisticeski international" (the Comintern's newspaper) concluded by saying that it was necessary for Romania to sign a treaty of mutual assistance with the great eastern neighbour, on the pattern of the Baltic states which had been constrained by Stalin to such documents, in September-October 1939, as a prelude to the future annexation⁸.

In fact, the Romanians were very well-aware of the Soviet threat and its coming to the fore after the conclusion of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the outbreak of World War II following the partition of Poland between the two signatories. In theory, there were several possibilities of counterpoising the Soviet claims, but, as long as England, France and Germany were at war with each other, the Romanians' hopes, though meagre, were put in Italy and the Baltic states, including Bulgaria, which more and more Romanian politicians (N. Iorga, A. Calinescu, Grigore Gafencu, even King Charles II) thought about drawing into the Balkan Entente.

The most important Romanian diplomatic initiative then remained "The Neutrals' Bloc", aiming to create an alliance that would regroup no less than seven neuter states, namely the four members of the Balkan Entente, Hungary, Bulgaria and Italy, which had annexed Albania in the autumn of 1939. The project failed, meeting with the hostile attitude of the USSR, while

⁵ *România în jocul Marilor Puteri (1938-1940). Documente (1938-1941)*, Editors: Corneliu Mihail Lungu and Ioana Alexandra Negreanu, with an introduction by Dinu C. Giurescu, Bucharest, Curtea Veche Publishing House, 2000, doc. 19, p. 188.

⁶ *Ibidem*.

⁷ *Ibidem*, doc.32, pp. 206-209.

⁸ Vitalie Văratice, *Preliminarii la raptul Basarabiei și nordului Bucovinei*, Bucharest, Libra Publishing House, 2000, doc. 30, pp. 142-154.

Germany and Italy had moments of sympathy towards this Romanian initiative which they, finally condemned⁹. Actually, the Axis Powers had no desire for a war to break out in the Balkans, for it was here that Germany bought agricultural and oil products and a wide range of raw materials; on the other hand, the two states of the Axis neither wished an improvement of the inter-Balkan relations, namely the conclusion of Romanian-Hungarian or Romanian-Bulgarian agreements. Had the small Balkan states seen eye to eye, then Germany would have had less chances of manoeuvring in future. The Soviet Union, however, did not depend, in any way, on the resources provided by the Balkans and any unpredictable event could mean an occasion to expand its influence beyond the limits that had been rather ambiguously specified in the secret agreements of 23 August 1939. The difference of views and interests between Germany and the USSR became very clear, at least as far as we are concerned, in the spring and summer of 1940.

When the Campaign in Finland was approaching the end, the Soviet Union gradually channelled its attention on Romania. Thus, on 4 March 1940, "Pravda" published an article in which Hungarian and Bulgarian claims to the Romanian territory were considered just, on 20 March 1940, the TASS news agency issued a similar commentary and, on 29 March 1940, Molotov was to speak openly, in front of the Supreme Soviet, about the lack of a Romanian-Soviet non-aggression treaty caused by the Bessarabian issue, the settlement of which was hoped to be a peaceful one¹⁰. In April and May 1940, the Soviet-Romanian relations worsened, the Soviets massing numerous large units near the border with Romania and accusing the Romanian border guards of "intolerable" incidents, many of them fabricated or skewed in the vehement Soviet protest notes¹¹.

Many of the German successes on the Western Front precipitated the USSR's plan to take action as regards Bessarabia, stirring anxiety in Berlin which did not wish the Balkans to become a theatre of war. As a final sign of camouflaging the politico-military preparations to annex Bessarabia, the Soviet government appointed Anatoli I. Lavrentiev as minister plenipotentiary in Bucharest, a position that had remained vacant after Butenko's escape¹² in 1938.

⁹ George Ungureanu, *Problema Cadrilaterului în contextul relațiilor româno-bulgare (1939-1940)*. Brăila, Editura Istros, 2009, pp. 343-348.

¹⁰ I. M. Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

¹¹ "Armata română de la ultimatul la dictat. Anul 1940. Documente", coordinated by Florica Dobre, Vasilica Manea, Lenuța Nicolescu, vol I, Bucharest, "General Ștefan Gușă" Foundation Publishing House, 2000, doc. 1-6, pp.1-17.

¹² Cătălin Calafeteanu, *România și -micile puteri- vecine: 1940-1944*, Bucharest, Enciclopedic Publishing House, 2011, p. 15.

Before submitting the well-known ultimatum to Romania, the Soviet Union consulted with Germany and, to a lesser extent, with Italy. Therefore, on 20 June 1940, three days after the war on the Western Front had ended, Molotov was discussing, in cautious terms, with the Italian ambassador Augusto Rosso, the position of the USSR with regard to the issue of Bessarabia and the Soviet giant's fondness of Hungary and Bulgaria. Moreover, with regard to Bulgaria, Molotov underlined the "fine Soviet-Bulgarian neighbour relations" and "Bulgaria's right over Dobruja", without distinguishing between Cadrilater and Old Dobruja, which anticipated a scenario of Soviet-Bulgarian territorial junction carried through at the expense of Romania with the entire occupation of Bessarabia and Dobruja, respectively¹³.

Speculating Yugoslavia's fear of Italy, the USSR signed an economic agreement with this country, on 11 May 1940, which was followed, on 25 June 1940, by the re-establishment of the diplomatic relations between the two states¹⁴. Thus, Romania remained completely isolated.

Between 23 and 26 August, the Soviet and German governments exchanged telegrams which showed Hitler's dissatisfaction with the Soviets' expanding their claims to Bukovina and Germany's obsessive concern that a war should not start between the USSR and Romania¹⁵. Several Romanian historians (Gh. Buzatu, Fl. Constantiniu, Neagu Djuvara, etc.) think that accepting the Soviet ultimatum was a mistake and that, by rejecting Molotov's ultimatum, Romania would have had a better destiny at the end of the conflagration, after having gone through the experience of a total German occupation west of the Prut.

In his memoirs, King Charles II mentioned that he personally wanted to resist but the Crown Council opposed. In fact, the sovereign, who had practically assumed the entire power of the state, hid behind a consultative not deliberative body. Moreover, during the first Crown Council held on 27 June, at 12.00, a certain majority (11-10), which was against accepting the Soviet ultimatum, had taken shape but, in the evening, the king called a second Council and only 6 participants pronounced themselves for resistance¹⁶. If King Charles had truly wanted to oppose the Soviet aggression, he could have done it, relying on the First Crown Council held on 27 June 1940. If the king had wished to defend the frontiers of the country, he would have given a clear answer to the Chief of the General Staff, General Florea Țenescu, at the end

¹³ G. Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 355-356.

¹⁴ C. Calafeteanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 96.

¹⁵ I. M. Oprea, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

¹⁶ Alexandru D. Duțu, Maria Ignat, *Drama României Mari. Rapt și umilință*, Bucharest, Universal Dalsi Publishing House, 2000, pp. 80-84.

of May, when the latter asked for precise instructions in the face of a more and more probable Soviet invasion¹⁷.

We shall not go into details about the contents and character of the Soviet ultimatums of 26-27 June 1940. We should mention, however, some aspects regarding the USSR's behaviour towards Romania, after the occupation of Bessarabia and northern Bukovina.

1. By the acts of 26-28 June 1940, the USSR committed an aggression against Romania, breaking a number of international agreements they had signed (the Briand-Kellog Pact, the London Conventions for the Definition of Aggression etc.).

2. The Soviet state did not even comply with the terms imposed by force on Romania, occupying the Hertza region, which belonged neither to Bessarabia nor to Bukovina, attacking the Romania troops in retreat and having all sorts of claims during the negotiations conducted at Odessa¹⁸.

3. The Soviet army continued to display a hostile attitude towards the Romanian one, causing continuous border incidents, preparing new extended attacks against Romania and capturing, in autumn 1940, several holms in the Danube Delta.

4. In July-August 1940, the Soviet Union elaborated and accepted to put into practice scenarios which aimed to dissolve the Romanian state and make the territorial junction with Hungary¹⁹ and Bulgaria²⁰ that had been promised the entire Transylvania and Dobruja, respectively; the governments of these small states were not blinded by the hostility towards our country, but they played the Soviet card and used it as a blackmailing tool with Hitler who was interested in maintaining stability in south-eastern Europe.

This explains why, on 30 August 1940, Germany and Italy mutilated Romania's borders, giving our country, in return, guarantees against any potential aggressor, which deeply displeased Kremlin, but limited the effects of Soviet aggressions in late 1940.

In conclusion, the act of 28 June 1940 represented the final point of preparations for invasion, of some intentions that had been lurking for more than two decades and, also, the beginning of a work of complete dismemberment of the Romanian national state, which was only partially accomplished, due to the interests of other power centres (Germany and Italy) that *nolens volens* had become the only guarantors of the existence of Romania as a country.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 73.

¹⁸ „Armata Română...”, vol. cit., *passim*.

¹⁹ Mircea Dogaru, Gh. Zbucea, *O istorie a românilor de pretutindeni*, Vol. I, Bucharest, D.C. Promoțiuni Publishing House, 2004, pp. 6-7.

²⁰ G. Ungureanu, *op. cit.*, pp. 359-362, p. 367.