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BESSARABIA'S TRANSITION FROM BEING A PART OF EMPIRE TO NATIONAL INDEPENDENCE. THE ROLE OF THE ROMANIAN ARMY IN THE PROCESS OF THE UNIFICATION OF BESSARABIA WITH ROMANIA, 1918

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Abstract

The transition of Bessarabia from being a part of the Russian Empire to achieving national independence and subsequent unification with Romania in 1918 represents a pivotal moment in Romanian history. This process was shaped by a combination of geopolitical upheavals, internal political dynamics, and external influences. The Romanian Army played a decisive role in ensuring the stability and security of Bessarabia during its journey toward unification.

Following the collapse of the Russian Empire amidst the chaos of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, Bessarabia faced significant challenges, including social unrest, power vacuums, and external threats. The creation of the Moldavian Democratic Republic in 1917 marked the region's assertion of autonomy, but sustaining this independence required both internal consolidation and external support.

The Romanian Army's intervention in early 1918, invited by Bessarabian leaders, helped restore order, protect vital infrastructure, and counter Bolshevik incursions. This military presence created the conditions necessary for the political elites in Bessarabia to deliberate on their future. On March 27, 1918, the Sfatul Țării (Country Council – the legislative assembly) voted in favour of unification with Romania, an act seen as

both a culmination of the region's aspirations and a response to the pressing security concerns of the time.

This paper examines the complex interplay of military, political, and social factors that facilitated Bessarabia's transition from a peripheral province of the Russian Empire to an integral part of Greater Romania. It highlights the Romanian Army's critical but often contested role in stabilizing the region and shaping its political destiny, situating the events within the broader context of post-imperial transformations in Eastern Europe during the interwar period. The paper will also underline the key points of the debates caused by different interpretations of historical events and the legitimacy of political decisions made during that time.

Key words: Romanian Army, Bolshevik Revolution, Bessarabia, military intervention, World War I

During World War I, the Russian Empire, which included Bessarabia since 1812, experienced significant internal turmoil, culminating in the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which led to the dissolution of the empire. Against this background of instability, the legislative body of Bessarabia, called Sfatul Țării (*Country Council*) declared the autonomy of Bessarabia on December 2, 1917, and subsequently, its independence on January 24, 1918.

Due to the spread of anarchy and disturbances, generated by the Bolshevik troops and other disorganized groups, in January 1918, the Romanian army was requested by Bessarabian authorities to enter the province in order to stabilize the situation and restore public order. The Romanian military presence created a secure environment for new political developments that ultimately led to the unification of Bessarabia with Romania, on March 27, 1918.

The military intervention of the Romanian army had a decisive impact on the success of the unification of Bessarabia with Romania – a fact that sparked controversy, scrutiny and interpretation. Historical narratives regarding these events can be complex and vary depending on political and ideological perspectives.

The article aims to identify the factors that prompted the intervention of the Romanian Army in Bessarabia, its role in the process of Bessarabia's political transition and its subsequent unification with Romania, as well as the key points of the debates caused by different interpretations of historical events and the legitimacy of political decisions made during that time.

The Bolshevik Revolution, unfolded in Petrograd on November 7, 1917 led to Russia's withdrawal from the war. In this context, the situation on the Eastern Front took an unpredictable turn with the gravest consequences for Romania, especially after the signing of the ceasefire between Soviet Russia and the Central Powers on December 5, 1917, and the full armistice on December 15, at Brest-Litovsk. The revolution and its aftermath had not only a profound impact on the situation on the Romanian front, creating significant challenges for both the Romanian military and the strategic landscape in Eastern Europe, but also led to a series of events that destabilized the front and created new political dynamics in Bessarabia.

Lenin's decision to conclude peace led to a rapid disintegration of the Russian army, which had been Romania's ally on the Eastern Front. This left Romania isolated and severely weakened. The new realities on the front forced the Romanian military authorities to sign the Focșani Armistice on December 9, 1917. Nevertheless, despite this armistice, the Entente, especially the French, continued to hope to use the Romanian Army as a bulwark against the spread of Bolshevism across Europe⁽¹⁾.

It is important to stress that the disintegration of the Russian Army also led to chaos and anarchy in regions near the Romanian front, particularly in Bessarabia, where retreating Russian soldiers often turned to looting and violence.

In this context, the stability of the situation in Bessarabia was an essential condition for Romania's survival. Located in the rear area of the front, Bessarabia provided access to food, weapon depots, and was intended as a refuge in case a new offensive by the Central Powers would force the abandonment of Moldova. As it was anticipated, the eastward flight of Russian troops transferred the problem of revolutionary disturbances from Moldova to Bessarabia, which was unprepared to face them.

Throughout 1917, Bessarabia went through a series of significant transformations, including the declaration of autonomy, the introduction of democratic principles, and the implementation of agrarian reforms. The February 1917 Russian Revolution urged the Bessarabians to advocate more actively for their national rights and political freedom. Moldovan soldiers and officers from all fronts began organizing themselves into "Moldovan committees". The issue of Bessarabia's autonomy was a major topic at the First Congress of Moldovan Soldiers, held in Chișinău from October 20 to 27, 1917⁽²⁾. After a week of discussions, the congress made key decisions concerning Bessarabia's autonomy, the nationalization of Moldovan troops, the formation of Moldovan cohorts, and most importantly, the establishment of the Country Council (*Sfatul Țării*) as a legislative body.

1. Glenn E. Torrey, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, (Bucharest, Meteor Publishing, 2014), 289

2. Dumitru Preda, *Sub semnul Marii Uniri. Campaniile Armatei Române pentru întregirea țării 1916-1920*, (Bucharest, Editura Militară, 2019), 152

On November 21, 1917, the Country Council commenced its sessions and, on December 2, adopted the Declaration proclaiming Bessarabia as the Moldavian Democratic Republic (MDR), part of the “democratic federative Russian republic, as an equal partner”⁽³⁾.

From its earliest days, the Moldavian Democratic Republic faced extremely complex and challenging provocations. Among these, the most difficult was the chaos and insecurity resulting from the demobilization of the Russian army from the front in Romania. After the armistice, the situation rapidly deteriorated and was further exacerbated by the Russian troops abandoning the front, enticed by the Bolsheviks. The retreating Russian soldiers left a trail of violence and destruction as they headed towards Ukraine, adding to the turmoil caused by the transfer of German and Austrian prisoners from Russia back to their countries⁽⁴⁾. The young Moldavian Democratic Republic (MDR) was clearly unable to cope with the waves of disorder and criminality that followed.

Under these circumstances, on December 19 the Country Council, decided to grant full authority to the Council of General Directors, the executive body, to seek external assistance in safeguarding the newly formed republic⁽⁵⁾.

To better understand the importance and the necessity of the decision to send Romanian troops to Bessarabia, it is needed to have a broader look at the events that occurred on the Romanian Front after the Bolshevik revolution and the chaos brought by the Bolsheviks among the Russian army in Romania.

General Shcherbachev repeatedly sought assistance from the Romanian Army to maintain order among his troops, but the Romanian Prime Minister, Ion I.C. Brătianu, was cautious, fearing involvement in Russia’s internal conflicts⁽⁶⁾. However, as chaos within the Russian army grew and the threat to Romania’s political and military stability intensified, the Council of Ministers, during the night of December 21 to 22, 1917, implemented exceptional measures to remove foreign troops from Romanian territory. This decision was primarily driven by the concentration of numerous Bolshevik forces in and around Iași (*after the retreat from Bucharest, the city became, for two years the capital of Romania*), who intended to eliminate General Shcherbachev, overthrow King Ferdinand, and establish a communist regime in Romania. The entire Romanian Army was placed under the command of General Constantin Prezan, and the territory was brought under the authority of the General Staff. To effectively enforce military authority, the territory was divided into eight zones, each under the command of generals or senior officers. Romanian troops in these areas were instructed “to stop and inspect Russian units

3. Iurie Colesnic, *Sfatul Țării*, (Chișinău, Museum, 1998), 47.

4. Ion M. Oprea, *România și Imperiul Rus, 1900-1924*, vol. 1, (Bucharest, Albatros, 1998), 172-173

5. Adina Berciu-Drăghicescu, Lidia Brâncău, *Unirea Basarabiei cu România 1918-1927. Documente*, (Bucharest, Globus, 1995), 13

6. Ion Giurcă, *Prezența unor trupe române în Basarabia și Bucovina în anul 1918*, in *Rolul Armatei Române în realizarea și consolidarea Marii Uniri*, (Iași, Editura Universității “Alexandru Ioan Cuza”, 2020), 132

heading toward the Prut, allow only authorized movements, and disarm any Russian troops found in disarray. Isolated units or Russian soldiers who maintain a proper and respectful attitude should not be mistreated". The same order firmly stated: "Everyone living or moving within this country, regardless of nationality, must respect our laws and maintain public order"⁽⁷⁾.

Certain situations required Romanian troops to use force. To prevent the abandonment of the front lines, actions were taken against Russian units from the 7th, 16th, and 23rd Army Corps, as well as the 13th and 30th Infantry Divisions. Russian units were intercepted while moving toward Bessarabia or engaging in activities against Romanian state order, leading to several confrontations in Socola, Galați, Pașcani, Spătărești, and Mihăileni⁽⁸⁾.

Romanian units were forced to stretch thin and spread out to cover a larger area of the front. As the Russians vacated sectors, the Romanians stepped in, ultimately leading to the entire Romanian front being held solely by Romanian forces. By the end of January 1918, these measures ensured that the entire territory between the Eastern Carpathians and the Prut River was under Romanian military control, with the few remaining Russian troops in the region posing no threat.

By the end of January 1918, Romanian troops had secured all territory between the Eastern Carpathians and the Prut River, and the remaining Russian forces in the area were largely ineffective.

The Romanian army's efforts to restore order were condemned by Soviet authorities, leading to tensions and threats of war from Russia.

As Russian troops entered Bessarabia, they caused instability in the Moldavian Democratic Republic, prompting local authorities to request Romanian military assistance in early 1918. On January 4, 1918, Moldavian authorities formally requested Romanian military assistance through General Shcherbachev⁽⁹⁾ and general Henry Mathis Berthlot, the commander of the French Military Mission to Romania. In response, the Romanian Minister of War, General Constantin Iancovescu, ordered a detachment of volunteers from Transylvania stationed in Kyiv to proceed to Chișinău to support the local authorities. However, the situation in Bessarabia was chaotic, with increasing numbers of disorganized Russian troops settling in the region. This disorder was fuelled by urgent requests from local Moldavian authorities for additional Romanian military support. On January 19, 1918, the Transylvanian detachment arrived in Chișinău, but upon arrival, they faced a violent clash with Russian and Bolshevik forces. The Transylvanian troops were

7. Vasile Șt. Țuțulea, *Armata în apărarea Unirii Basarabiei cu România*, on <https://curierul.forter.ro/07ist/02.htm>

8. Ibidem

9. Glenn E. Torrey, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, 291

overwhelmed, disarmed, and subjected to mistreatment, including being paraded through the city in torn uniforms⁽¹⁰⁾.

Under these circumstances and in response to the threats facing Romanian military objectives and vital communication routes between the Prut and Dniester rivers, the Romanian government decided, that Bessarabia needed to be supported and secured to protect Romanian interests. To this end, four Romanian divisions were assigned to the task. The order of the Romanian Minister of War instructed the Army “to repel Bolshevik bands attempting to cross into Bessarabia over the Dniester, to ensure order and maintain regular railway operations, and to restore order throughout Bessarabia, protecting the lives and property of the inhabitants from plunder and crime”⁽¹¹⁾. Additionally, the Army was tasked with dismantling all centres of agitation in Bessarabia and escorting “Russian deserters, who had formed bands to rob and incite the local population, by train or on foot back to their homes”. According to the order, soldiers from the Russian army who were originally from Bessarabia were to be sent “back to their homes”⁽¹²⁾.

It is important to emphasise that this intervention, which was both a response to the chaotic situation and a strategic move to secure Romania’s eastern borders, was also influenced by the strategic interests of both the Central Powers and the Entente, though the nature of their support differed.

The Central Powers, particularly Germany and Austria-Hungary, were primarily focused on concluding peace negotiations with Romania and stabilizing the Eastern Front. The presence of Romanian forces in Bessarabia was seen as a way to create a buffer against Bolshevik forces, which both the Central Powers and Romania viewed as a common threat. With Romania cut off from the Entente by late 1917 and facing severe shortages, the Central Powers provided some economic relief in exchange for cooperation, which indirectly supported Romania’s ability to deploy troops in Bessarabia.

The Entente powers, especially France and the United Kingdom, were deeply concerned about the spread of Bolshevism following the Russian Revolution. They viewed Romanian intervention in Bessarabia as a countermeasure to contain the spread of communist influence in Eastern Europe. The Entente also provided diplomatic backing to Romania’s actions by not opposing the intervention, acknowledging that a stable Romania was crucial for the post-war balance in Eastern Europe.

The Romanian divisions, under the command of General Ernest Broșteanu, were deployed east of the Prut with specific roles: the 11th Infantry Division and the 2nd

10. Dumitru Preda, *Sub semnul Marii Uniri. Campaniile Armatei Române pentru întregirea țării 1916-1920*, 153

11. Gheorghe E. Cojocaru, *Sfatul Țării. Itinerar*, (Chișinău, Civitas, 1998), 71-72

12. Ibidem

Roşiori Regiment aimed to reach Chişinău, the 13th Infantry Division acted as a liaison force, and the 1st Cavalry Division advanced towards Soroca, in the North⁽¹³⁾.

General Constantin Prezan, Chief of the Romanian General Staff, issued a manifesto explaining the Romanian army's intervention was requested by newly elected Bessarabian authorities. The manifesto reassured residents that the Romanians were not there to seize land but to stabilize the region⁽¹⁴⁾.

From January 23 to March 12, 1918, the Romanian Army executed its mission, leading to varying degrees of conflict and resulting in casualties. The Romanian forces and General Broşteanu entered Chişinău on January 25, 1918, meeting with local authorities including Ion Inculeţ, the head of the Country Council. While facing little resistance in the north, heavy fighting occurred in Bender due to logistical challenges and the pockets of resistance by Bolshevik forces and local Soviet sympathizers. In southern Bessarabia, the 13th Infantry Division dealt with a diverse and often hostile population, extending the time needed to restore order⁽¹⁵⁾.

The Romanian campaign in Bessarabia lasted about two months, with the majority of the time spent moving troops and restoring order. Romanian troops faced losses: 3 officers and 122 soldiers killed, and 12 officers and 309 soldiers wounded⁽¹⁶⁾. The Romanian Army was received positively by the Romanian majority but faced some mistrust from Russian-speaking and Ukrainian populations due to anti-Romanian propaganda of the Bolsheviks, including the newly installed Soviet Government.

It is important to mention that the Soviet reaction to the Romanian Army's campaign in Bessarabia was highly negative and hostile. On January 26, the Soviet Government decided to sever the diplomatic relations with Romania. The Soviets arrested the Romanian diplomats and confiscated the Romanian Treasure. The Romanian military intervention was labelled as "criminal", viewing it as an unjustified invasion of what Petrograd considered to be Russian territory⁽¹⁷⁾. It is also important to emphasise that the Soviets engaged in anti-Romanian propaganda, particularly among the Russian-speaking and Ukrainian populations in Bessarabia. They spread fears that the Romanian intervention was a prelude to the annexation of Bessarabia and the suppression of local rights, attempting to sow discord and resistance against the Romanian forces.

Overall, the Soviet reaction was characterized by a combination of diplomatic outrage, military resistance, and propaganda efforts aimed at undermining Romanian control in Bessarabia.

13. Dumitru Preda, *Sub semnul Marii Uniri. Campaniile Armatei Române pentru întregirea ţării 1916-1920*, 154

14. Petre Otu, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, (Bucharest, Litera, 2019), 280

15. Dumitru Preda, ..., 154

16. Vasile Şt. Țuțulea, *Armata în apărarea Unirii Basarabiei cu România*, on <https://curierul.forter.ro/07ist/02.htm>

17. Ion Constantin, *România, Marile Puteri şi problema Basarabiei*, (Bucharest, Enciclopedica, 1995), 20

Meanwhile, the political and military landscape in Europe was changing rapidly, influenced by large-scale military operations, the collapse of empires, and revolutionary movements. On January 26, 1918, Ukraine declared its independence, prompting the leaders in Chișinău to consider the necessity of proclaiming the independence of the Moldavian Republic as well. On February 6, 1918, the Country Council unanimously adopted a Declaration proclaiming the Moldavian People's Republic as an independent state⁽¹⁸⁾.

However, this Declaration of independence took place while Romanian troops were present in Bessarabia, a situation that angered the Soviet government, particularly Vladimir Lenin, in early 1918. Moreover, the subsequent developments and the specific circumstances in Bessarabia and its neighbouring regions (*Bessarabian elite realized that the Moldavian Republic was not capable to resist by itself*), along with the expressed will of the population, required taking the next, decisive step in shaping Bessarabia's future. This culminated in the adoption, on March 27, 1918, of the Declaration which proclaimed Bessarabia's reunification with Romania. These events became a focal point in Soviet historiography concerning Romania's relations with the USSR and continue to be a contentious topic, often surpassing the distortions of the Soviet-era and Bolshevik ideology.

The Romanian intervention in Bessarabia during 1917-1918 is treated in Soviet and later, Russian, historiography with significant criticism, often framing it as an act of aggression and occupation rather than a legitimate action. It is argued that Romania's intervention was a violation of Russian sovereignty. Bessarabia, which had been part of the Russian Empire since 1812, was seen as an integral part of Russian territory. The intervention is thus often depicted as an illegal annexation rather than a liberation or assistance effort. The intervention is frequently characterized as driven by imperialist ambitions. Romanian actions are interpreted as part of a broader strategy to expand Romanian territory at the expense of a weakened Russia, particularly during a time of internal turmoil following the Bolshevik Revolution. During the Soviet era, the narrative around the Romanian intervention was heavily influenced by Bolshevik ideology, which portrayed Romania as an aggressor and an enemy of the working class⁽¹⁹⁾. This narrative often emphasized the suffering of the local population under Romanian rule. But most importantly, the narrative was used by the Soviets in order to justify the annexation of Bessarabia in 1940 and 1945, in accordance with the secret protocols of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, claiming that, in fact, the occupation of Bessarabia was a liberation from the oppression of the Romanian state and it reflected the desire of the majority of the population.

18. Petre Otu, *România în Primul Război Mondial*, 285

19. Valentin Burlacu, *Actul Unirii Basarabiei cu România în sistemul de propagandă și în istoriografia din RSS Moldovenească*, in *Akados* No.3/2018, 83-89, on <http://akados.asm.md/files/83-90.pdf>

In contemporary Russian historiography, while there is some recognition of the complex context in which the intervention occurred (*such as the chaos of the Russian Civil War and the collapse of imperial authority*), the overall assessment remains critical. Romanian actions are still often seen as opportunistic and detrimental to Russian interests. Moreover, lately, these myths and falsehoods so very prevalent in Soviet historiography and reused now in the recent Russian historiography, reinforce the propaganda narratives of the current Kremlin regime. These narratives are designed to justify not only Moscow's aggressive and hostile policies toward its neighbours during the interwar period, but also its present-day neo-imperialism. As in the past, these narratives seek to rewrite history, challenge the legitimacy of neighbouring states' sovereignty and territorial integrity, and undermine their right to defend themselves against Russian aggression.

To conclude, it is important to stress that the reunification of Bessarabia with Romania was a complex process shaped by the interplay of military intervention, political manoeuvring, and the aspirations of the Bessarabia people. The presence of the Romanian Army was crucial in stabilizing the region and facilitating the eventual union and the deployment of Romanian troops to Bessarabia was imperative for the following reasons:

The inability of the authorities of the Moldavian Republic to handle the growing threat from advancing Bolshevik forces, which prompted the Bessarabian elite to seek Romania's military assistance;

Romania's strategic need to establish stability in the region between the Prut and Dniester rivers, with approval from both the Central Powers and the Entente. Both parties saw the Romanian intervention as beneficial to their respective strategic interests, leading to a rare convergence of support from opposing sides during a complex period of World War I.

The political transition of Bessarabia could only be achieved with external support. This support was essential to offset the imbalance of power between Bessarabia and the Bolshevik forces.

Author's short CV

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