40TH ANNIVERSARY OF ANNEXATION OF BESSARABIA AND NORTHERN BUCOVINA

By George Cioranescu

Summary: On 26 June 1940, the Soviet Union sent Romania an ultimatum demanding the "return" of Bessarabia and the transfer of Northern Bucovina to Soviet jurisdiction. This study reviews the particularly harsh diplomatic preliminaries to that ultimatum, which left Romania no option other than to accept willy-nilly, or to expect war, a war in which Romania would be isolated, with no possibility of aid from either France, which was partially occupied, or Great Britain, which has hard-pressed and organizing its own defense, or by the Third Reich, which had divided Europe into spheres of influence in a Secret Protocol appended to the Soviet-German nonaggression Treaty. Under such conditions, Romania had to give in to force, but did not recognize any historical, legal, or ethnographical justification for the Soviet annexation of Bessarabia and northern Bucovina, which it considers simply occupied territories.

Germany Stands Aside

The Soviet ultimatum of 26 June 1940, worded in unusually harsh terms, came as a surprise to Romania and under conditions which left no option other than acceptance or war. Although Soviet intentions had been fairly well veiled, the disintegration of the European collective security arrangement first organized after World War I by France and, to a lesser extent, Great Britain, the establishment of the Third Reich's "new order" in its place meant important political changes in Eastern Europe. Since Romania was caught between the Soviet Union in the East and the Third Reich, which was extending its dominion to the West, King Carol II

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approached Berlin the spring of 1940 to see how much he could rely on German support as a counterweight to Soviet pressure and its claims to Bessarabia. (1) The answer received from German Foreign Minister Joachim von Ribbentrop was hardly encouraging, however, for he said bluntly that the question "whether and to what extent Romania might be disposed to agree to any revisionist demands by its neighbors, as for example by Russia on the Bessarabian question," (2) was a prerequisite for German support.

The Soviet Union Raises the Bessarabian Question

As a matter of fact, the Bessarabian question had been raised by Soviet Foreign Minister Vyacheslav M. Molotov about two months earlier, in a speech delivered on March 29 to the Supreme Soviet, in which the Soviet Foreign Minister said:

- Of the neighboring southern states I have mentioned, Romania is one with which we have no pact of non-aggression. This is due to the existence of an unsettled dispute -- the question of Bessarabia, whose seizure by Romania the Soviet Union has never recognized, although we have never raised the question of recovering Bessarabia by military means. (3)

Shortly after these statements, which presaged no good for Romania, von der Schulenburg, the German Ambassador to Moscow, reported to the Foreign Ministry in Berlin that Molotov had told him the following on June 23:

- The solution of the Bessarabian question brooked no further delay. The Soviet government is still striving for a peaceful solution, but it is determined to use force should the Romanian government decline a peaceful agreement. (4)

In order to justify this change in Soviet attitude Molotov pointed out the "long time" - that had elapsed since his speech to the Supreme Soviet, with Romania doing nothing to help find a solution to the Bessarabian problem. Von der Schulenburg.

(1) See the telegram sent by German Minister to Bucharest Wilhelm Fabricius to the German Foreign Ministry, dated Bucharest, 29 May 1940, in Documents on German Foreign Policy, 1918-1945 (London, Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1956) Vol.IX. pp.466-467.

(2) Joachim von Ribbentrop's telegram to the German Legation in Romania, dated Berlin, 1 June 1940, ibid., p. 493.


(4) Friedrich Werner, Count von der Schulenburg's telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, dated Moscow, 23 June 1940, Ibid., p. 3.
replied that he had not expected this new decision by the Soviet government, that Soviet claims to Bessarabia were not contested by Germany, but that, since Romania was then supplying Germany with very large amounts of essential military and civilian raw materials, difficulties in its foreign relations would lead to a serious encroachment on German interests. Consequently, he requested Molotov not to take any decisive step before the German government had decided on a stand concerning the intentions of the Soviet government. That same day Molotov let von der Schulenburg know that the Soviet government would wait until June 26 for the German government's reply on the matter.

Commenting on von der Schulenburg's communication, Ernst von Weizsaecker, State Secretary of the German Foreign Ministry, defined Germany's attitude to Moscow and Bucharest as follows:

With regard to the matter itself, the Russians already knew that we agree to their demand for Bessarabia; however, there has been no discussion of Bucovina thus far. (5)

He thought that direct negotiations should be conducted between Moscow and Bucharest, adding that:

Molotov could be told that we knew that Romania was prepared in principle to negotiate and that Germany could, if desired, suggest that we, on our part, induce Romania to send a plenipotentiary at once.

According to Weizsaecker, it would be said in Romania that "the Romanian government was not apparently aware of the gravity of the situation and was counting, at least in part, on our help against Soviet Russia." In reality, the Third Reich was "fully sympathetic to the idea of settling the Bessarabian problem," as Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop wrote to his ambassador to Moscow.

(5) Ernst Freiherr von Weizsaecker's telegram to Wolfsschantz (code name for Hitler's East Prussian field headquarters) (dated Berlin, 24 June 1970), Ibid., pp. 7-8. While Bessarabia had belonged to the Russian Empire between 1812 and the collapse of the czarist order (with the temporary loss of Danubian southern Bessarabia between 1856 and 1978), Bucovina was historic Hapsburg territory, acquired by Romania, along with the Banat, Crișana, Maramureș, Transylvania, and Bessarabia, when the two neighboring empires collapsed in the wake of World War I. Northern Bucovina is, however, predominantly Ukrainian, and the USSR claimed it on ethnic grounds, as it later did with Czechoslovakia's ex-Hapsburg Transcarpathian Ruthenia. The population of Bessarabia, by contrast, is largely ethnic Romanian. Moscow has by no means held a monopoly on the Machiavellian practice of using or ignoring historical, ethnic, or other arguments as they suited or did not suit its own interests.
His only concern was to salvage German economic interests in Romania, which was a good source of supply of oil and grain for the Third Reich. For this reason, von Ribbentrop added in his communication to von der Schulenburg:

Please point out clearly, once again, to Molotov our great interest in Romania's not becoming a theater of war." (6)

On 21 June Fabricius reported to Berlin that the Soviet Envoy to Bucharest, Anatolii Iosifovich Lavrentiev, had arrived in Bucharest, but that the Romanian government did not know what he was going to demand of it. If he demanded Bessarabia, Romania would have to draw Germany’s attention to the danger threatening the Balkans; if he demanded bases, Romania was fully aware of the sad experience of the Baltic countries. In any case, the Romanian government was hardly disposed to abandon the population of Moldavia, the majority of whom were ethnic Romanians, to Bolshevism and Russification.

Reporting on a discussion he had with Premier George Tătărescu on June 26 Fabricius, the German Minister to Bucharest, said that the Romanian premier had confirmed to him that were Lavrentiev to claim Bessarabia during his audience with the king "the Romanian government and the king were determined to fight rather than simply give in." (7) Tătărescu added that:

The surrender of this region would, therefore, mean handing over 2,000,000 of their own people to Soviet Russia, to say nothing of all the other dangers it would entail for the Danube region in the wake of Russian influence penetrating beyond the Dniester.

Tătărescu thought of offering the Soviet Union an exchange of populations which would not have affected the existing borders; possibly he would have confined himself to offering an exchange of Ukrainians, Russians, and Jews from Bessarabia for the "Moldavians" (Romanians) living east of the Dniester, but Fabricius considered that this solution would not satisfy the Soviet Union.

In another conversation on the same day (June 26) with Ion Gigurtu, who claimed that a Soviet invasion was imminent, Fabricius asked the Romanian Foreign Minister whether the Russians could be offered something more than the prime minister had told him.

(6) Ribbentrop's telegram to the German Embassy in Moscow (transmitted by telephone) (Berlin, dated 25 June 1940), Documents... op. cit., pp. 12-13.
Gigurtu then mentioned Romania's frontier of 1856-1878, when Russia's Bessarabian frontier was pushed back from the Danube. But Fabricius replied that he could not take any stand on that issue, although it would be advisable, in any case, to find some peaceful compromise. (8)

An Ultimatum Full of Surprises

As a matter of fact, none of these anticipated scenarios came true, for the Soviet Union surprised diplomatic circles both with the speed and brutality of its June 26 move and with the extent of its claims.

At 1100 hours on 26 June 1940, George Davideescu, Romanian Minister to the Kremlin, was summoned by Molotov, who handed him an ultimatum in which the Soviet Union called upon Romania to surrender Bessarabia and northern Bucovina, claiming that Romania had taken advantage of Russia's military weakness in 1918 and wrested some of its territory, Bessarabia, away, "thus destroying the centuries-long union of Bessarabia, inhabited principally by Ukrainians, with the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic." The note went on to say that now, when the military weakness of the Soviet Union was a thing of the past, the Soviet Union considered it necessary and opportune, in the interest of re-establishing justice, to reach, together with Romania, an immediate solution concerning the restitution of Bessarabia. Consequently, the Soviet government proposed to the Romanian government: a. that Bessarabia be returned to the Soviet Union; and b. that northern Bucovina, "as shown in the attached map," be transferred to Soviet jurisdiction. The note ended with the following sentence: "The Soviet government expects the reply of the Romanian government in the course of June 27." (9)

Davideescu tried to counter the statements in the ultimatum, replying that up to 1812 Bessarabia had always been an integral part of the Principality of Moldavia. He also protested that such a grave issue should be raised in the form of an ultimatum, without having previously been submitted to negotiation between the parties concerned, which still, nevertheless, maintained correct relations. Finally, Davideescu added that the deadline set for a reply to the note handed him so late in the evening was too short and that he was unable to convey to Bucharest the plan attached to the ultimatum on time. (10)

(8) Summary of Fabricius's 26 June 1940 telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, Ibid., p. 20.


(10) Grégoire Gafenco, Préliminaires de la Guerre à l'Est. De l'Accord de Moscou (21 Août 1939) aux Hostilités en Russie (22 Juin 1941) (Fribourg, Switzerland: Egloff, 1944), p. 337.
Molotov accepted none of these arguments. His tactics were to launch a strong attack, without allowing Romania any alternative but surrender or war. There was nothing left for Davidescu to do but to send a coded message to the Romanian Foreign Ministry. This message began: "The following is the text of the ultimatum which was handed to me this evening at 2200 hours by Molotov."

At that point, telegraphic connections with Moscow broke off abruptly and the interruption lasted 7 hours, thus reducing the deadline from 24 to 17 hours. Alexandru Cretzianu, who was then Secretary-General of the Romanian Foreign Ministry, said that he and newly appointed Foreign Minister Gigurtu went to see Prime Minister Gheorghe Tătărescu to discuss how to reply. Since the Franco-British forces had been eliminated from the continent following the collapse of France and the British evacuation, the only possible counterforce capable of opposing the Soviet Union was to be sought in Germany and Italy. Tătărescu decided to inform the German and Italian governments that Romania could not accept an ultimatum of a military character, and that his country was determined to defend itself, declaring a general mobilization. At that time Fabricius reported to Berlin: "war is to be expected." (11)

Germany and Italy Abandon Romania

At 1000 hours on June 27 Fabricius was summoned to the royal palace where Prime Minister Tătărescu read the text of the Soviet ultimatum to him in the presence of King Carol II and Foreign Minister Gigurtu. King Carol II told the German representative that Marshal Hermann Goering had given him (the king) clearly to understand (during the king's 1938 visit to Germany) "that a Romanian rapprochement with Germany excluded a rapprochement between Romania and the Soviet Union." Consequently, the king considered that Germany "bore some responsibility for the present situation."

He called on Germany and Hitler to seek "some way to assist Romania." (12) But during the audience with King Carol II, who was trying in this way to get German help to save Bessarabia from Soviet annexation, Fabricius received an urgent telephone message from von Ribbentrop in Berlin, who ordered him to convey a message to the Romanian Foreign Minister. Basically, Ribbentrop said: "In order to avoid a war between Romania and the Soviet Union, we can only advise the Romanian government to yield to the Soviet government's demands." (13) Upon hearing this, the king "launched


(12) Fabricius's 27 June 1940 telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, Documents... op. cit., Vol. X, p. 33.

(13) Telephone message from von Ribbentrop (on a special train) to Minister Paul Otto Schmidt in the German Foreign Ministry; the latter subsequently relayed it to German Legation Counselor Gerhard Steltzer in Bucharest at 1030 hours. Ibid., p. 28.
forth into criticism of our policy. How could they ask him to cede one third of his territory without fighting? After all he had obtained the Fuehrer's word. One cannot depend upon the Reich." King Carol was so angry that Fabricius had to interrupt him; interjecting that, in his capacity as a representative of the Reich, he "could not listen to such rash words from His Majesty." (14)

At 1500 hours of the same day Radu Crutzescu, Romanian Minister to Berlin, unaware of events in Bucharest and following instructions which had become obsolete, went to the German Foreign Ministry and asked Weizsaecker whether Germany would be prepared to act as mediator in the Bessarabian issue. The reply was that his question was out of date in the wake of Fabricius's step. (15) Using King Carol II's reproaches as a pretext, despite the fact that Prime Minister Tatarascu had apologized to Fabricius, (16) Hitler informed the Romanian king that Germany had never had any political interest in Romania, and therefore refused to exert any influence in the current dispute. To make his refusal the more categorical, Hitler added that Romania had for decades been a steadfast and active ally of the German Reich's enemies. (17)

Half an hour after Fabricius had delivered his disappointing message, Italian Minister to Bucharest Pellegrino Chigi reported to the Royal Palace conveying the advice of the Italian government: Romania was advised to accept the Soviet ultimatum and execute it without offering any resistance, although earlier Italian advice had been to resist any Soviet attack in the interest of civilization and of the Latin world. (18) In fact, on June 26 Italian Foreign Minister Galeazzo Ciano, informed by German Ambassador Hans Georg Mackensen about the June 25 Molotov-von der Schuleinberg meeting, "remarked that he did not see any reason why the Italians should not suggest to the Russians that they should not close the door to a peaceful solution, and offered to exert their influence in Bucharest, if this is desirable for us or for the Russians." Ciano added that he was going to talk to Mussolini on the following day about the whole issue and was confident that the latter would agree. (19) As expected, the Duce expressed agreement with this handling of the Bessarabian question and concurred with the German position.

(14) Fabricius's 27 June 1940 telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, Documents... , op. cit., p. 34.
(15) Ernst Weizsaecker's Memorandum, Documents... , op. cit., p. 31.
(16) Fabricius's 27 June 1940 telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, Documents... , op. cit., p. 37.
(17) Adolf Hitler's message to King Carol II (telephoned to Fabricius), Fuehrer's Headquarters, 29 June 1940, Ibid., pp. 58-59.
(18) Gafenco, op. cit., p. 393.
Pears of a Concentric Attack

Romania might possibly have resisted the Soviet Union if Bucharest had received assurances from Germany that Hungary and Bulgaria would not take advantage of a war on Romania's eastern frontier to attack it for the sake of their own claims to Romanian territory (i.e., Transylvania, Crisana, Maramures, and the Banat for Hungary; and Silistra for Bulgaria). The Romanian government therefore asked Berlin, through Minister Crutzescu, "whether the German government would be in a position to indicate if Hungary and Bulgaria would refrain from any move in the event of a Russo-Romanian war." Weizsaecker gave an evasive answer. He said that "the question regarding the attitude of Hungary and Bulgaria is based on an assumption of something that we wish to see avoided, a Russo-Romanian war," (20) which did not mean that Germany committed itself in any way.

The Bulgarian government was following the evolution of the Bessarabian question with particular interest, and the Bulgarian Minister to Berlin Farvan Draganov informed Ernst Woermann, Director of the Political Department in the German Foreign Ministry, that

Czar Boris III and the Bulgarian government would find themselves in an extremely difficult position if they did not take advantage of the present moment. (21)

The Hungarian government, in its turn, submitted a memo to the German Foreign Ministry in which it said that

In the opinion of the Hungarian government, if Romania, on its own initiative, enters into agreements with another state on territorial questions, Hungary must also be included. (22)

The possibility of opening a second front was also taken into consideration by the Crown Council when it reached a decision on 27 June 1940.

The Crown Council Answered Evasively

The Crown Council, made up of advisers of King Carol II, met at the royal palace immediately after the German answer was received. At this meeting the historian Nicolae Iorga spoke


(21) Ernst Woermann's Memorandum, dated Berlin 27 June 1940, Documents... op. cit., p. 38. It should be recalled that Romania originally acquired Silistra from Bulgaria in the Second Balkan War of 1912-1913 by similarly taking advantage of a neighbor's weak position.

(22) Memorandum, dated Berlin, 27 June 1940. Ibid., p. 39.
categorically in favor of resistance at any cost, claiming that a country willing to surrender a part of its territory without fighting would run the risk of losing everything. His opinion was shared by the representatives of Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Transylvania. The majority of the council's members, however, realized that Romanian resistance would have no chance of success, for Romania stood quite alone politically. According to this viewpoint, which was presented by the Ministry of War and strongly supported by the Chief of the General Staff, even if Romania would succeed in resisting the first frontal Soviet attack, it could never mount a resistance of any duration, for there was no way for it to obtain supplies of military material. In fact, Germany had agreed, according to the terms of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, not to supply arms and war material to any country at war with the Soviet Union. This meant that Romania could not hope to become a second Finland. Consequently, the decision to give in, made by the Crown Council, was justified as follows:

Because of its desire to preserve peaceful relations with the Soviet Union, the Crown Council approves of the decision of the Romanian government to ask the Soviet government to set a time and place where the delegations of both governments could meet to discuss the Soviet note. (23)

The Second Soviet Ultimatum

This answer did not mean explicit acceptance of the Soviet ultimatum, but neither could it be regarded as a refusal. It left the question of deciding on the substance of the matter, the Soviet claims, up to the forthcoming negotiations. Under such conditions, since the Crown Council's announcement that it would send plenipotentiaries to discuss the Soviet conditions might be considered unacceptable by the Kremlin, the Soviets might have invaded.

On June 27 Molotov told Davidescu that the Soviet government considered the Romanian government's reply of June 27 unacceptable, since it made no direct reply to the question whether it accepted the Soviet government's proposals of an immediate transfer to the Soviet Union of Bessarabia and northern Bucovina. When Davidescu replied that the Romanian answer meant acceptance, Molotov demanded that the Romanian authorities evacuate Bessarabia and northern Bucovina within the next four days, starting at 1400 hours on June 28. Romania had 12 hours in which to respond to this new ultimatum. On that day -- June 28 -- the Red Army was going to occupy key positions in the claimed areas Chisinau, Cernauti, and Cetatea Alba. Romania would be held responsible for any damage caused to communications, warehouses, airports, factories, etc. (24) Molotov added:

(23) Communiqué No. 4, from the royal palace, Universul, Bucharest, 26 June 1940.
My colleagues, especially the military, are very dissatisfied with the answer of the Romanian government, for it does not seem to have a clear understanding of the situation on the frontier. The Soviet government expects a reply before noon tomorrow. After that hour we shall proceed to act. (25)

**Implicit and Explicit Romanian Reservations**

On June 28 at 1100 hours the new Romanian Foreign Minister Constantin Argetoianu sent the final reply, reproduced on June 29 by TASS as follows:

The Romanian government, in order to avoid the grave consequences of recourse to force and the commencement of hostilities in this part of Europe, is constrained to accept the demand that it withdraw from the territories specified in the note of the Soviet government.

Romania did, however, request that the deadline be extended, since it would have been extremely difficult to complete evacuation of the territory in four days because of damage caused by rains and floods. Molotov conceded that in case of need a newly created Romanian-Soviet Commission, which would meet in Odessa, could take up the question of postponing the evacuation for a few hours.

From the text of the answer delivered by Davidescu it emerges that Romania had only accepted the demand that it withdraw from those territories, without, however, recognizing any legal justification for the act of surrendering the territories.

Prime Minister Tătărescu told parliament that the government rejected the historical and ethnic arguments invoked in the Soviet ultimatum to justify the annexation of Bessarabia. He said:

Bessarabia is a Romanian province torn away from the territory of Moldavia in 1812 and returned to the fatherland in 1918 by the will of a population which, after a century of oppression, had not forgotten its forefathers' language, had not allowed its feelings or mores to become alienated. The union of Bessarabia with Romania was not an act of conquest but one of liberation, based on rights which have been and still are inalienable in the eyes of our nation.

Speaking about the ethnic character of Bessarabia the Prime Minister added:

Some 1,800,000 Romanians live in Bessarabia. This province has been and still is one of the oldest bastions of the Romanian nation, and the foreign populations which have settled there have changed neither its character nor its appearance. Bessarabia, with its free peasants, its fortresses and other buildings from the days of the voivode, has been and still is Romania.

Tatarescu went on to say that capitulation in the face of superior force had been the real reason why Bessarabia had been surrendered:

In the final hour when we still had time to give our answer, we decided to accept. I declare here, before this parliament and the country: we have decided to withdraw from Bessarabia and northern Bucovina in order to save the Romanian state and not to jeopardize the future of the Romanian nation. I declare here that we made this decision under pressure, at one of the gravest moments of our history, leaving it to the future to pass judgment on our act. (26)

Therefore, the stand adopted by the Romanian government in the Bessarabian crisis in 1940 was to agree not to the cessation of Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina, but only to evacuate those territories under the threat from a greater force, which did not entail transfer of the legal title of possession to that territory. Romania considered that, in this way, it would preserve its historical and national rights to the provinces occupied by the Soviet Union, rights that could be reclaimed under more favorable conditions.

Brutal Enforcement of the Ultimatum and Its Consequences

At the beginning of June 1940 numerous Soviet divisions, backed by armored brigades, had been concentrated along the Dniester River and in northern Bucovina. On June 25 these units were operationally ready and had gone on the alert. According to the program prepared by the Russians, the Romanian army and authorities were to withdrawn in four stages, one per day, back to previously set lines. During this operation Romanian and Soviet troops were to be kept separated in order to avoid any incidents. Nevertheless, the Soviet troops failed to observe the timetable set by their own government. They advanced at a far quicker pace, with some units reaching the Prut River at 1300

(26) "Statements of George Tatarescu, Royal Adviser and Prime Minister," Universul, June 1940.
hours, on June 30 instead of on July 3. During their advance the Soviet units acted in a provocative and hostile manner to the Romanian troops, who had been categorically ordered not to resort to arms. Under such conditions King Carol II complained to Hitler that the Soviet troops had insulted and disarmed Romanian soldiers, and asked for Germany to help by sending a German military commission to Bucharest. (27)

The withdrawal of Romanian troops under constant pressure from the Soviet army, which tried to cut off their route in order to confiscate Romanian supplies, ammunition, and war materiel, as well as the abandoning, without struggle, of the population humiliated the Romanian army.

Prime Minister Tătărescu told Fabricius the following about the mood of the Romanian public:

The people are extremely indignant, and the king has called the Russian demands unbearable, while a large part of the Romanian nation is willing to go to war and will not forgive the government for unconditionally ceding the entire area.

The Error of Too Heavy a Red Pencil

Molotov had given Davideșcu a 1/1,800,000 scale map on which the new Romanian-Soviet border was traced with a heavy stroke of red pencil which covered a seven-mile-wide band of territory. As a result, the new demarcation line inadvertently cut Herta and the northern corner of Romania off, a territory that belonged neither to Bessarabia nor to northern Bukovina, since it was a part of Dorohoi County in Moldavia.

The Romanian government proposed to the Kremlin that a mixed commission should meet to negotiate a definitive settlement in a friendly way of this additional territory, while Prime Minister Tătărescu asked Germany to bring its influence to bear upon Moscow to leave at least this territory to Romania. However, his attempt failed. (28) But the Soviets ignored these Romanian suggestions, so that Herta, which had not been mentioned in the Soviet ultimatum, was nevertheless occupied by Soviet troops. This is how the Soviet Union came to appropriate a 10-kilometer-strip of territory (about six and a quarter miles) that belonged to


(28) Fabricius's telegram to German Foreign Minister von Ribbentrop, Bucharest, 28 June 1940, Documents... op. cit., Vol. X. pp. 52-53.
Moldavia. In Herta Soviet units disarmed two Romanian battalions and killed two officers and four soldiers of the 16th Cavalry Regiment who died not knowing what mischief a heavy Soviet pencil had caused.

**Bessarabia -- a Victim of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Treaty**

In point of fact, the dice deciding the fate of Bessarabia had been cast even before the Soviet ultimatum was sent, under Article 3 of the Secret Protocol to the 23 August 1939 Soviet-German Nonaggression Treaty establishing zones of influence partitioning Europe. The article reads as follows:

"With regard to southeastern Europe the Soviet Union calls attention to its interest in Bessarabia. Germany declares its complete lack of any political interest in that area. (29)"

In partitioning Europe into zones of influence according to the terms of the Secret Protocol, Bessarabia, together with Finland, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, and eastern Poland, fell into the Soviet sphere. Ribbentrop explained that when the spheres of interest in southeastern Europe were marked out the Russians had expressed their interest in Bessarabia and the southeastern parts of the continent. He allegedly did not want to "put down in explicitly written form recognition of the Russian claim to Bessarabia because of the possibility of indiscretion"... and he preferred "a formulation of a general nature for the protocol (emphasis in the text). He went on to say that he had proceeded in accordance with the general instructions given by the Fuehrer about southeastern Europe and with a special directive, received before his departure for Moscow, "in which the Fuehrer authorized me to declare that Germany was not interested in the territories of southern Europe, even, if necessary, as far as Constantinople and the Straits. The latter, however, were not discussed." (30)

Romania's leaders in 1940 did not know of the existence of the Secret Protocol. That is why they still placed their hopes on German support or mediation, unaware that Germany had formally declared itself not interested in the fate of Bessarabia, surrendering it to the Soviet Union. By yielding Bessarabia to the Soviet Union Hitler not only made an old wish of czarist Russia to push its borders as far south as possible come true, but also made Romania less able to enter the forthcoming war at the side of France and Great Britain, by weakening its military, physical, and moral strength. Hitler expressed this opinion only a few days after the signing of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Treaty, when he wrote to Mussolini:

(30) Ibid., pp. 10-11.
Thanks to these arrangements, Russia's favorable attitude in case of a conflict is guaranteed and the possibility of Romania's joining such a conflict is eliminated as of now. (31)

Mussolini shared this view, for he replied:

The Moscow treaty blocks Romania and might modify Turkey's stand... (32)

The Gold Reserves of the National Bank Withheld as "Reparations"

When Molotov informed von der Schulenburg on June 26 of the Soviet decision to occupy Bessarabia militarily, the German ambassador told him that the cession would be facilitated if the Soviet Union were to refund to Romania the gold reserves of the National Bank, which had been transferred to Russia for security reasons during World War I. These were the reserves of the Romanian National Bank on which constituted the guarantee for the issuing of 314,580,446 lei worth of gold. (33) On the basis of the protocol signed between Russian Minister Poklevsky Koziel and Romanian Minister of Finance Nicolae Titulescu on 27 July-9 August 1917, the Romanian treasury contained a total declared value of 7,000 million gold lei. (34) When Romanian-Soviet diplomatic relations were resumed in 1934 the Soviet Union returned only a few symbolic items that had belonged to the Romanian treasury (a standard meter /yardstick/ and kilogram weight, and nine highly accurate thermometers). Later, around 1956, the Soviet government returned to the Bucharest authorities several artistic items from the Romanian treasury in Moscow: 35,000 old coins, 1,400 paintings, ecclesiastical objects, etc., (35) but nothing of the gold reserves of the National Bank. However, von der Schulenburg's suggestion brought no response, for the Soviet Foreign Ministry replied:


(32) Ibid., p. 88.

(33) The Romanian Encyclopaedia (Bucharest, 1943), Vol. IV, p. 514.


(35) "The Solemn Ceremony at which the Soviet Union Handed Over Historical Treasures of Romanian Art," Scîntea, 7 August 1956.
There can be no such discussion, for Romania 
expoited Bessarabia for a fairly long time. (36)

Why Was Northern Bucovina Annexed?

The Soviet claim to northern Bucovina took both the Romanians 
and the Germans by surprise, for that territory had never belonged 
to czarist Russia -- it had also not been included in the zone 
of Soviet influence established by the Secret Protocol in 1939.

When Molotov informed Ambassador Schulenburg that the Soviet Union claimed not only Bessarabia but also the whole of 
Bucovina, the latter replied that a peaceful solution would be 
considerably facilitated "were the Russians to give up Bucovina, 
which has never been a part of czarist Russia." Molotov responded 
by arguing that

Bucovina is the last missing part of a unified 
Ukraine and it is on this account that the Soviet 
government is obliged to attach particular im-
portance to a simultaneous settlement of this 
issue with that of Bessarabia. (37)

Molotov apparently did not plead convincingly enough for Schulenburg 
concluded that:

I was left under the impression that Molotov had not 
completely closed the door to the possibility of 
giving up Bucovina during the negotiations with 
Romania. (38)

Furthermore, when meeting with Italian Ambassador Augusto Rosso, 
Molotov did not say a word about Bucovina when discussing Soviet claims 
to Romanian territory. (39)

In any case Molotov again summoned von der Schulenburg on 
June 26. Referring to the discussion they had had on the previous 
day, he said that the Soviet government had decided to limit its 
demands to the northern part of Bucovina and the city of Cernăuți:

According to Soviet opinion, the boundary line 
should run from the southernmost point of the Soviet 
western Ukraine at Mt. Kniatiasa, east along the 

(36) Von der Schulenburg's Telegram to the German Foreign Ministry, 
Moscow, 26 June 1940, Documents . . . , op. cit., Vol. X, p. 36.

(37) Ibid., p. 21.

(38) Ibid.

(39) Molotov's statement to Italian Ambassador Augusto Rosso on 
Soviet policy in southeastern Europe, Degras, op. cit., 
Suceava (River) then northeast to Hertsa on the Prut (River) whereby the Soviet Union would obtain a rail connection from Bessarabia via Cernauti to Luvova. (40)

Even after Romania had received the Soviet ultimatum the Romanian government called upon Germany "to make attempts to have the Soviets agree to leave Romania Cernauti," noting that a large part of its population was made up of Germans. (41) The reply of the German Foreign Ministry to that question read:

The question of Cernauti is not to be mentioned under any circumstances whatsoever in the telephone conversation with Minister Fabritius. (42)

Writing to Weizsaeccker about the atmosphere prevailing in the diplomatic corps in Moscow, von der Schulenburg remarked that news of the action against Romania had been greeted with general surprise precisely because the Soviet Union had also demanded the northern part of Bucovina, although there had never been any earlier Soviet claims to that region. In von der Schulenburg's opinion, this claim had been raised by the Ukrainian circles in the Kremlin. Although he could not say for sure which Ukrainian had so much influence in the Kremlin, the German ambassador thought that young Pavlov, from the Soviet Embassy in Berlin, could be the man: "he is a special pet of Stalin and Molotov; Stalin once described him to me as 'our little Ukrainian.'" (43) In any case the justification given in the Soviet ultimatum for its claim to northern Bucovina was that acquisition of this territory would serve as compensation for the damage caused to the Soviet Union and to the population of Bessarabia by the 20-year-long Romanian "dominion" over Bessarabia. Therefore, in addition to withholding the gold reserves of the Romanian National Bank, the Soviet Union was granting itself compensation by occupying a part of Romanian territory without any historical justification. The occupation and exploitation of northern Bucovina as "compensation" for the damage allegedly caused by Romania has now lasted 40 years.

Bucovina -- An Apple of Discord

After Molotov first claimed the entire territory of Bucovina he then reduced his demands to northern Bucovina. Later, however, he reverted to his original demand and, in a memo handed to von der Schulenburg on September 21, also claimed southern Bucovina, so that the Soviet Union could take possession of the entire province. This new territorial claim was made after the Vienna arbitration and after northern Transylvania had been surrendered to Hungary. Molotov allegedly said that "for the present" the Soviet government had

(41) Telegram of German Legation in Romania to German Foreign Ministry, Bucharest, 28 June 1940, ibid., p. 46.
(42) Rudolf Steg (assistant to Minister Schmidt), Note dated Berlin, 28 June 1940, ibid., p. 48.
(43) Von der Schulenburg's Letter to the State Secretary, Moscow, 11 July 1949, ibid., p. 195.
confined itself" to claiming northern Bucovina, which meant that it reserved for itself the right to raise the question of southern Bucovina on another occasion. Von der Schulenburg declared, however, that he could not remember this short sentence, a fact which caused Molotov to draw in his horns a bit, saying that, "apparently, he had made this remark in an indefinite form at the time." (44)

The claim to southern Bucovina was the subject of extensive discussions during the meeting between Hitler and von Ribbentrop with Molotov and Vladimir Georgievich Dekanosov (Deputy People's Commissar for Foreign Affairs). On that occasion Molotov again maintained that although the Soviet Union had at first confined its claims to northern Bucovina, under the present circumstances Germany must nevertheless understand the Russian interest in southern Bucovina. Instead of replying to this point Germany guaranteed the territory of Romania, "completely disregarding Russia's wishes concerning southern Bucovina." In fact, Hitler answered that according to an oral agreement the former Austrian territories in that region should be included in the German sphere of influence. The territories which were included in the Soviet zone were listed by name (Bessarabia, for example), but there was no mention of Bucovina as being included in the Soviet sphere of influence. The fact that a part of Bucovina was nevertheless occupied by Russia meant "a considerable concession on the part of Germany." So far as Molotov's objection that the territorial revision claimed by the Soviet Union was small when compared to the various revisions Germany had made by force of arms, Hitler emphasized that the latter type of revisions had not been the subject of any German-Soviet agreement. (45)

Therefore, Bucovina turned into an object of political divergences between Germany and the Soviet Union, with Germany maintaining that the claim on Bucovina constituted an encroachment of the provisions of the Secret German-Soviet Protocol of 23 August 1939 on the delimitation of the zones of influence and spheres of interest of the two big powers which had partitioned East Europe.

Consequences of the Ultimatum

According to Molotov, the immediate consequences for the Soviet Union of the Soviet ultimatum were the annexation of Bessarabia, with a surface area of 44,500 square kilometers and a population of 3,200,000, and Bucovina, with a surface area of 6,000 square kilometers and a population of 500,000. "As a result the frontier of the Soviet Union had now been shifted westward and has now reached the Danube which, next to the Volga, is the biggest river in Europe and one of the most important commercial routes for a number of European countries." (46)

(44) Von der Schulenburg's Memorandum to German Foreign Ministry, Moscow, 21 September 1940, ibid., Vol. XI, pp. 137-138.
(45) Memorandum by an official of the Foreign Minister's Secretariat, dated Berlin, 15 November 1940, ibid., p. 553.
So far as Romania was concerned, it not only lost Bessarabia and northern Bucovina but also northern Transylvania and Silistria, for, as Ribbentrop put it:

"It is right that the Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionist demands on Romania should be set in motion by the occupation of Bessarabia and northern Bucovina." (47)

This opinion was also shared by the German ambassador to Moscow, who had played the role of an intermediary between Moscow and Berlin during the surrender of Bessarabia. He said:

The Soviet Union really opened up a great complex of questions by its settlement of the Bessarabian matter with unexpected speed, and it has thereby forced us, in order to avoid military complications in the Balkans, to take quick decisions on the matter of the Romanian-Hungarian dispute. (48)

The third Reich's unfriendly attitude to Romania was explained by both Ribbentrop and Hitler as being due to the pro-Western policy adopted by Romania between the two world wars, and especially on the eve of World War II when Bucharest accepted the French-British guarantees (1939). Ribbentrop said that

"Romania must blame its own policy for the crisis caused by the Bessarabian problem. Last year the Romanian government accepted England's promise of a guarantee and welcomed it very enthusiastically in both official statements and in the press, though this promise of a guarantee was aimed directly against Germany." (49)

The same argument -- Romania's anti-German policy, based on the acceptance of the British guarantee -- was also used by Hitler. (50)

While Romania, as a victor state of the first world war, had generally followed a pro-Western policy and was part of the French alliance system during the interwar period, the real reason for its dismemberment was that its geographical location, oil, and agriculture made it an important bargaining chip in a redivision of Europe between two totalitarian, aggressive states.

(47) Von Ribbentrop to the German Embassy in Moscow, dated Berlin, 6 September 1940, Documents ..., op. cit., Vol. XI, p. 30.

(48) Von der Schulenburg's Telegram to the Foreign Ministry, dated Moscow, September 1940, ibid., p. 18.

(49) Von Ribbentrop's Telegram to German Legation in Romania, dated Berlin, 27 June 1940, ibid., Vol. X, p. 35.

(50) Adolf Hitler's message to King Carol II of Romania, dated Führer's Headquarters, 29 June 1940, ibid., Vol. X, pp. 58-59. (According to a notation on the document, this message was telephoned to Fabricius at 2000 hours.)