In the history of relations between Russia and Romania, the Soviet ultimatum on Bessarabia of June, 1940, signified the end of an era. This era began in the last stages of World War I and was marked by the seemingly insoluble conflict over Bessarabia, which prevented the two countries from attaining more than a precarious degree of regularity in their mutual relations.

The historical roots of the Bessarabian question go back to the early nineteenth century when, as a result of the 1806-12 Russo-Turkish war, about half of the vassal principality of Moldavia was handed over by the Ottoman Empire to its Russian counterpart. This act set off a chain of claims and counterclaims to eastern Moldavia, otherwise known as Bessarabia, marring the subsequent evolution of relations between Russia and Romania. Thus, in 1856, as a result of the Crimean War, part of Bessarabia was reunited with Moldavia, only to be reincorporated into the Russian Empire in 1878 at the end of the war with Turkey in which Romania and Russia fought side by side. Because of this disappointment, Romania tried thereafter to avoid close relations with its powerful eastern neighbor. During World War I, however, the two countries were allies once again. The Romanian king and government decided, not without hesitation, to join the Entente, considering Transylvania as a potential gain preferable to Bessarabia. But when war ended, Romania, beyond all expectations, obtained both provinces, and paradoxically it was Bessarabia which it acquired first.

The more important details of the circumstances in which Bessarabia reverted to Romanian possession are still shrouded in obscurity, existing accounts being either notoriously biased toward one side or another, or too general to provide an intelligible picture. In spite of these difficulties a few general points are discernible from the existing literature on the subject.

Bessarabia united with Romania in March 1918 at the end of what appears to have been a gradual process of separation from Russia, beginning immediately after the October Revolution, which was also experienced by other provinces situated on the periphery of the former Russian Empire. There is little doubt that in its origins this process was genuinely local, Romania appearing as a factor only in January, 1918, when her troops entered Bessarabia with the declared purpose of defending their rear bases of supplies which, as they were situated in the province, were threatened by the ravaging troops of Russian soldiers fleeing from the Eastern Front. Owing to scarce and unreliable evidence, it is difficult to assess the role played by the government in Bucharest in Bessarabian events which culminated several months later in the decision by the local legislative assembly to unite with Romania. However, outright coercion by Romania of the Bessarabian population, of which about 60 percent were of Romanian stock, seems improbable, although the strength of the nationalistic Romanian movement in the province is unclear.

The events in Bessarabia had immediate repercussions on relations between Romania and the new regime in Russia. Following the entry of Romanian troops into the province, the Soviet government declared war on Romania and confiscated her treasury and art objects deposited in Moscow. When the union of Bessarabia with Romania was effected in March, 1918, Soviet Russia condemned that act and categorically denied its validity. The Soviet government never officially departed from its initial position regarding the territorial conflict with Romania, but in the first post-war years a degree of willingness to compromise over Bessarabia is clearly observable. Only later did the Soviet Union adopt a tougher line in regard to the Bessarabian question and its solution, which finally materialized in the June, 1940, ultimatum.

* * *

The attitude of Romania toward the civil war and foreign intervention in Russia was one of non-interference. Some Romanian political factions were disposed to participate in the anti-Bolshevik campaign, but caution prevailed,


2. Dokumenty vneshnei politiki SSSR [hereafter DVPSSSR], I, doc. 52: “Declaration on the severance of diplomatic relations with Romania.” The Romanian government decided at the end of 1916 to transfer the gold reserves of the National Bank of Romania, which they feared would fall into the hands of the advancing German army, to Moscow for greater safety. The total value of the gold, jewels, and objects of art deposited in Moscow amounted to 320 million lei in gold. See N. Gr. Romascu, Tesaurul Românăei de la Moscova (București: Cartea Românească, 1934), p. 20.

3. DVPSSSR, I, doc. 136: “Soviet protest against the occupation of Bessarabia.”