

THE QUESTION OF BESSARABIA

BY

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Between the thirteenth and the nineteenth centuries, when *Moldavia* and *Wallachia* still formed separate Principalities, *Bessarabia* belonged to *Moldavia*, and when, in the fifteenth century, these territories passed under Turkish suzerainty, it shared their fate.

In the course of the eighteenth century Russian expansion reached the frontier of *Bessarabia*, and in 1812, after the defeat of the Turks by the Russians, the *Treaty of Bucharest* awarded the province to Russia. The *Paris Congress* returned the southern counties to *Moldavia*, but after the Russo-Turkish war in 1877—78 the Russians, notwithstanding the fact that Rumania had been their ally in the war, reoccupied them and retained them until the end of the world war.

The ethnic situation in the province was fairly complicated.

In the days of the Roman Empire this region had been a penal colony to which criminals and political offenders were sent as in later days they were sent to Siberia. Subsequently this population became mingled with the various ethnic elements which drifted into the country with the migration of the peoples in the Middle Ages. No reliable data are available as to the distribution of the present population. According to the *Russian census* of 1897, 47.6 per cent of the inhabitants were *Rumanian*, 27.8 per cent. were *Russian* or *Ukrainian*, and the rest *Jews*, *Tartars* and *Gypsies*. *Rumanian* writers, on the other hand, set the numbers of the *Rumanians* at 66 per cent, and some even as high as 75 per cent. These figures are probably fictitious, invented in order to provide an ethnical justification for *Rumanian* domination.

In 1917 the *Russian* revolution broke out and the population of Bessarabia was roused to activity.

In October of the same year there assembled in Kisheneff, the capital of the province, a conference of one thousand members which declared Bessarabia to be an autonomous province and appointed a National Council, the *Sfatul Tarei*, consisting of 120 members, of whom eighty-four were Rumanians, while the other thirty-six were Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Jews.

Meanwhile the Soviet Republic had been formed in Russia, and in November the *Sfatul Tarei* declared its adherence to it, advising the people of the province to "work for their common country, the Russian Soviet Republic, where their true salvation lies."

However, only two months later, in February 1918, the Council changed its mind; it declared the union with *Russia* to be dissolved and Bessarabia an independent republic. At the same time it found itself unable to cope with the unsettled conditions, "bordering on anarchy", which prevailed throughout the province, and appealed for assistance not, strangely enough, to Russia, but to *Rumania*. This country was just then at its last gasp, with two thirds of its territory occupied by the Central Powers; nevertheless it collected all its available troops and marched into *Bessarabia*. The *Soviet Government* protested at first, but on March 18 an agreement was reached under which Rumania undertook to withdraw her troops, with the exception of 10,000 left to maintain law and order. Needless to say, this obligation was not fulfilled.

There ensued, under the protecting wing of the Rumanian forces, a violent propaganda for union with Rumania. The non-Rumanian members of the *Sfatul Tarei* were arrested and many of them, including Pantzir, Rudev, Vronov, Tchumatchenko and Mme. Nadejda Grinfeld, were shot.

On March 27 the *Sfatul* assembled for the purpose of deciding the ultimate fate of the province.

On the previous day M. Marghiloman, the Rumanian Prime Minister, had arrived in Kisheneff. Martial law was declared, and on the day of the meeting the building in which the Council was sitting was surrounded by Rumanian

military. The *Sfatul* at this time comprised 160 members, but only forty-two were present. Thirty-eight voted for union with Rumania, on the understanding that the province would be granted self-government, with not only a separate administration but also a separate legislature. M. Marghiloman was sent for, and he accepted the *Sfatul's* decision in the name of King Ferdinand.

At the end of November 1918 the *Sfatul Tarei* was once again convened, ostensibly to discuss the agrarian question. Quite unexpectedly, late at night, the President of the Assembly laid before it a proposal to the effect that Bessarabia should renounce her autonomy and become a part of the Rumanian kingdom. Only forty-six members were present at the time. The *Peasant Party* tried to protest but to no avail. The President announced the Council's resolution, which declared the union of the province with *Rumania* and expressed the conviction that it would mean forming part of a country which was being governed in a democratic manner, — after which General Vaitoianu, the Rumanian Commandant, appeared in the hall and dissolved the assembly.

The union of Bessarabia with *Rumania* was recognized in October 1920 in a treaty concluded between *Great Britain*, *France*, *Italy* and *Japan*; only Great Britain and France ratified this treaty immediately, however; Italy's ratification was delayed, while Japan's took place only a few years ago.

The Soviet Republic, as was only to be expected, refused to recognize the transfer. The Rumanian *Government* made repeated attempts to induce the *Russian Government* to renounce their claim to the province, but without success.

In March 1924 a *Russo-Rumanian* economic conference took place at Vienna, at which the *Rumanian* delegates revived the Bessarabian question, making *Russia's* acceptance of the transfer a condition of their acceptance of the proposed terms. The *Russian* delegates did not meet this with a point-blank refusal; *M. Krestiensky*, the leader of the delegation, proposed that a plebiscite should be held. "*The Rumanian claims on Bessarabia*", he said, "have no historic basis, for in 1812, when *Bessarabia* was annexed by *Russia*, *Rumania* did not as yet exist as a State. If the *Rumanian*

Government is convinced that the majority of the population is honestly in favour of a union with the kingdom, let us have a plebiscite."

The Rumanian delegation, however, refused this suggestion, on the ground that the union had been recognized by the *Great Powers* and was thus a *fait accompli* which could not be subjected to revision.

During the last twenty years Rumanian diplomacy renewed its efforts to obtain the Soviet's sanction to the annexation. But the latter proved obdurate, and finally, at the end of June of the present year, it announced its intention of occupying not only *Bessarabia* but also the northern portions of *Bukovina*. At the time of writing these lines, on July 3, the occupation of these territories is probably completed.

"Greater Rumania" is a thing of the past.

In these days of mourning the Bucharest Professor, N. Iorga, wrote in his own paper, the *Neamul Romanesc*, "The red flag flies over Czernowitz and *Kisheneff*. How and why? The moment is not propitious for seeking an answer to these questions. Let us rather turn our eyes to what is left in that region which we were privileged to open up to civilization. There have been left three million tillers of the soil whose forefathers settled there in prehistoric times. There have been left in the towns the sacred memories of liberty and the generations we have reared, whose ideas and sentiments are our own. There have been left all the improvements we have been able to effect in a country where, when we came, we found only ignorance, Jews and rabble. And there has been left the expelled intelligentsia, which will never for a moment abandon the thought of recovering its rights."

These are fine words, but they are hardly borne out by Rumania's behaviour in *Bessarabia* during the past twenty years. In 1923 M. Pan Halippa, who had been President of the *Sfatul Tarei* in 1918, spoke these words in the Rumanian Parliament:

"For five years *Bessarabia* has lived, and still lives, under a *régime* for which no analogy can be found in the past, not even in the darkest pages of the administration of

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an African colony. Outside the law, without the most elementary human or civic rights, the citizens have to see their property and their honour at the mercy of the meanest agent of an irresponsible and all-powerful Administration. Extortions, violence, even executions without any previous legal procedure, occur day by day on the pretext of public security, and remain unpunished. And in this grave-yard no cry of protest can be raised; the press is in chains, no meetings are tolerated; every sign of civic life is extinct; the local autonomous institutions which flourished even in the days of the Tsars are suppressed."

Thus was civilization brought to *Bessarabia*. May not the manner of its introduction account, in a measure, for the dissolution of Greater Rumania?



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