

Romanian involvement in the Transnistrian War

Geopolitical Ambition or Fear of Instability?

Master of Arts International Relations Thesis

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Abstract

This historical thesis challenges the current consensus among scholars that Romania's involvement in the 1992 Transnistrian War, on the side of the Moldovan government, was motivated only by desire for reunification with its former territory of Bessarabia. The historical relationship between Romania and Moldova, the ethnic dynamics and distributions of Transnistria and the extent of Romanian intervention in the war are presented and analysed. A case is made that the Romanian government's immediate goal was not a political union Moldova, but maintaining stability.

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Flag of the Republic of Transnistria

Introduction

The *Columbia Encyclopaedia* describes Transnistria as “a narrow territory some 120 mi (195 km) long but barely 20 mi (32 km) across at its widest [with] a mainly Russian and Ukrainian population (59.2%, slightly more of whom are Russian) that objects to Moldovan-Romanian rapprochement”. It is not by chance that the ethnic make-up and geopolitical stances of the region are given as being the defining characteristics of the region. As many scholars note, the territory, by itself, had long been considered to be simply a constituent area of the historical region of Bessarabia¹ (now the Republic of Moldova). However, due to population movements that occurred during the Soviet era (Aklaev, 1996), the region’s ethnic make-up changed from a Moldovan-Romanian majority (as is the overall case of Moldova), to that of a Russo-Ukrainian majority. This ethnic makeup, a result of the complex history of the region, would ultimately lead to the outbreak of the 1992 Transnistrian War. However, most scholars agree that this conflict also broke out due to Transnistria’s opposition to a potential union between Romania and Moldova.

Suffice to say, nation-building is a difficult task, and one might argue that the story of the Transnistrian War should serve as a cautionary tale to all those peoples that aspire to achieve nationhood. It is a tale rooted in a byzantine history, ethnic divides, and foreign involvement. Together, these factors birthed a conflict in a region where bloodshed was not even conceivable all but a few years before the first round was fired. The war lies at the nexus of four nation-building endeavours. The first was the struggle of the fledgling Moldovan government to forge an independent unitary Moldovan state upon breaking away from the Soviet Union. The second was the struggle of the, soon-to-be, Russian state, which scrambled to maintain some level of influence in its periphery as the *Iron Curtain* of the *Cold War* collapsed and the Soviet Union fell apart. The third is that of Romania which, having just undergone a violent regime change², was attempting to forge for itself a new identity as a free-market

¹ Though this term is contested, as its use is widely considered to insinuate a pro-Romanian bias, as the name derives from the 17th century Romanian ruler Matei Basarab, for whom the region is named (Djuvara, 1999).

² The Romanian Revolution was the only instance of violent regime change within the context of the

capitalist democracy, whilst grappling with the touchy issue of deciding what its position was to be *vis-a-vis* Moldova. Lastly, the protagonist of the war, the self-proclaimed “Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic”³ was also exhibiting aspirations of statehood, which culminated in its *de facto* autonomy from the Moldovan central government by the end of the war.

The historical focus of this thesis lies in determining what the intentions of the Romanian government were when intervening (albeit insipidly) in the Transnistrian conflict. Within this context, nation-building (in the context of Moldova and, to a degree, Transnistria) and national interest (in the case of Romania and Russia) is a key issue. In light of this, the three main facets of the conflict (the ethnic dimension, historical context, and foreign involvement) are crucial, as all three had an impact on the nation-building efforts of all those involved. This cumulative impact would eventually trigger the outbreak of the war.

This thesis challenges the longstanding and underlying assumption that has laid at heart of the reasoning of most historians that have broached the topic of Romanian involvement in the war. That is to say that this thesis does not take at face value the belief that the involvement was simply the result of a desire to reunite with Moldova as soon as possible. Rather, it is hypothesized that involvement was calculated and intentionally minimal, since the Romanian government, at the time, chose to opt for a more cautious course of action and had far less grandiose ambitions than is frequently assumed. The reason behind this caution appears to have been the presence of political instability within its own borders. The political situation in Bucharest was far from stable at the time. Military involvement abroad might have resulted in another violent instance of regime change.

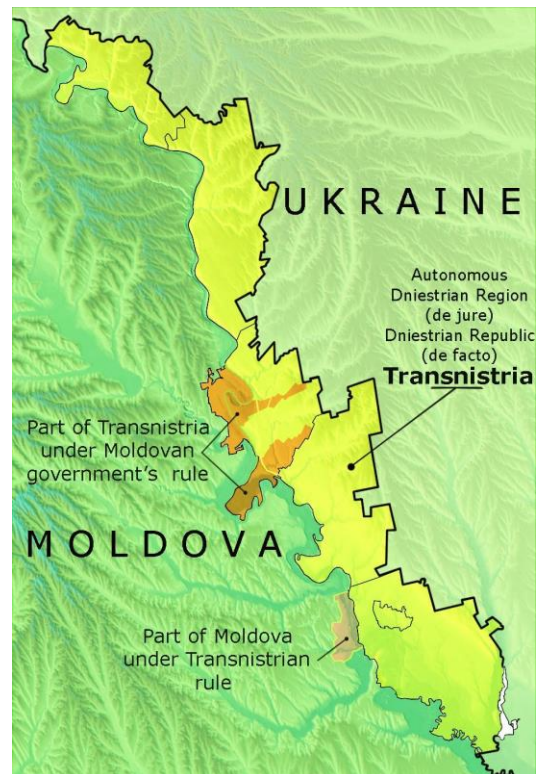
The realist tradition within the field of international relations would encourage the view of states as unitary actors. Within this grand theory of modern international relations, we may pose the research question: *what did ‘Romania’ hope to gain from its intervention in Moldova’s civil war?* This question carries with it the underlying assumption that Romania, as a state, was simply being a rational actor. However, a poststructuralist critique to such a framing of the research question would be that, given the ethnic nature of the Transnistrian conflict and political instability in Romania,

collapse of communism, with some scholars arguing that it was more of a very short civil war (Garrison, pg. 130), rather than a mere popular uprising, or even a *coup d’etat* (Siani-Davies, 1996).

³ Commonly known as *Transnistria*.

a more holistic and, thus, more complex approach is required.

The research design falls mainly under the direction of the thesis' nature as a historical piece. The fundamental requirements of this paper is an accurate rendering of the events that lead to and occurred during the war. This is made difficult by the fact that the war has become heavily politicized issue in Moldova, Romania, and Russia. As such, participants in any debate on the topic of the conflict may be split into three major categories: those who hold a Western and/or pro-Romanian bias, those who hold a Transnistrian and/or pro-Russian bias, and those who maintain some level of neutrality (albeit this neutrality is widely contested). Those who hold a pro-Russian bias point to Transnistria's right to self-determination as a foundation for statehood and the Moldovan government's seeming disregard for minority rights, while those who hold a pro-Romanian bias point towards Transnistria's historical appurtenance to Romanian Bessarabia, as well as Russian meddling⁴ as being causes of the war. Suffice to say, the methodological approach taken is to establish a correct, concise and clear description of the historical developments that lead to the conflict. A substantial amount of the thesis is dedicated to this end.



Map of Transnistria - Francis Jacobs, Big Think

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As such, in order to answer the research question, the first chapter must review the historical developments and the ethnic dynamics of Transnistria, and Moldova as a whole. These range from the Romanian ethno-genesis, Imperial Russia's annexation of Bessarabia in 1812 and the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, all the way the break-up of the Soviet Union, Moldova's independence, and the first shot fired at the Dubăsari in 1992. Ultimately, the first chapter essentially chronicles the ethnic, geopolitical, and global developments that ultimately lead to the war.

. The second chapter debuts with two short summaries of developments in

⁴ With the goal of maintain influence in the region (Devyatkov, 2012).

Russia and Romania, with emphasis placed on how they relate to Moldova and Transnistria. The purpose of these summaries is to pinpoint each state's reasons for intervention. The third and final part of the deals with bringing the thesis together by determining what the actual outcomes of the conflict were, and if they matched the expectations of any of the foreign actors involved. The second chapter will also explore how the fact that Romania, may not have been a unitary actor, provides for several possible answers to the research question, depending on whether or not we consider the intentions of the Romanian state, government, or people.

Within this analysis we may answer, not just the research question but, also, but also if it is accurate to describe Romania as a unitary actor at the time of the Transnistrian War. This is essential because a non-unitary Romanian state would be far more concerned with maintaining political stability within Romania, than with any potential reunification with Moldova. As such, answering the research question is tantamount to determining whether or not Romania could be described as a functioning state, let alone a functioning democracy, during the time of the war.

Literature Review

During the break-up of the Soviet Union, a war broke out between Transnistria and the newly independent Moldovan central government. The government of neighbouring Romania, having begun a transition from communism and Soviet alignment, to free-market capitalism and Western alignment, supported the Moldovan government and provided it with both weaponry and non-lethal aid (Arbatov, 1997). Historians, such as Heintz, King, and Latawski, underscore the potential underlying ambitions of the government in Bucharest, which they suggest was pursuing a potential reunification of the two countries⁵. As a direct result of this war, Transnistria remains what, many agree, amounts to a *de facto* state, having its own government, flag, currency, passport, police force, security forces, and other institutions that are generally considered a prerequisite to full statehood⁶. Moreover, the hypothetical reunification never came to pass.

Many insist that the latter was a far more important outcome, as the conflict made a potential Moldo-Romanian reunification (similar to that which had just occurred between the German Federal Republic and the German Democratic Republic) highly unlikely (Heintz, 2005). This represented a shift from what was the case before the war, when many would have argued that a reunification was “inevitable” (Socor, 1992). One of the many questions that, thus, arise, if one considers the war’s impact on the prospects of reunification, is whether or not Romanian intervention contributed to this outcome.

The reasons behind the war in 1992 are complex, and the series of events that unfolded are, at times, murky bordering on convoluted. Yet, there are some issues pertaining to the war the majority of scholars agree upon. First and foremost, the ethnic dimension played a central role during the conflict. This ethnic dimension, in turn, has two major elements to it. The first and most obvious issue is that of the identity of the population of Transnistria, in relation to that of the rest of Moldova. Transnistria represents a heavily *russified* (Roper, 2005) and *russophile* (Aklaev, 1996) part of the

⁵ The two countries had been constituent territories of the Kingdom of Romania, up until the Soviet occupation of territories, including Moldova, both before and after WWII (Aklaev, 1996, pg. 85).

⁶ International recognition, however, evades Transnistria, as the only international entities that recognize it are the similarly separatist states of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia.

country. Igor Cașu (2000) points to population movements, policies of *Russification* during the times of the Soviet Union and historical ties to Russia as being the source of the region's pro-Russian orientation (similar to Arbatov, 1997). This orientation is visible to this day, through Transnistrian policies such as the closure of Romanian language schools (Comai, 2015). Policies such as these originate from Transnistria's original „grievances” regarding the potential implementation of Romanianization policies by the new Moldovan state (King, 1994).

However, there is a greater ethnic debate present in the form of the relationship between Moldovans and Romanians. The link (Heintz, 2005) and/or interchangeability of the two populations is a debate all on its own, with some claiming that the two peoples are one and the same (King, 1994, and Comai 2015)⁷, and some insisting upon the dichotomy of the two (which is the official policy of Moldova). Cașu (2000, pg. 41) points to a 1924 Soviet census, in which Moldovans were registered as “Moldovans/Romanians”, to highlight how Moscow's position has changed over the years, from seeing Moldovans and Romanians as being interchangeable terms, to becoming indicative of inherently distinct identities. However, nowadays, Heintz insists that Moldovan officials view Romania as a cultural „threat” to their search for a national identity, insisting upon a distinction between the two peoples. This view has resulted in the Moldovan government's policy of distancing themselves from Romania⁸. Suffice to say, the Transnistrian government finds itself upholding the later view.

This official stance held by the Transnistrian leadership is fundamentally linked to the *de facto* state's inception, at the peak of the breakup of the Soviet Union. This is the second issue among which most scholars agree. It appeared, after Moldova gained independence from the Soviet Union in 1991, that a reunification with Romania would soon follow (King, 1994). As a reaction to this prevalent belief, opposition soon emerged, centred primarily in two regions: *Găgăuzia*, where the Turkic *Găgăuz* people forms the majority, and in Transnistria, where Russians and Ukrainians made up the majority of the population. Both regions cited concerns that a reunification would result in their respective populations being discriminated against within the newly formed state (Roper, 2010). Soon, this fear morphed into a belief that the two populations

⁷ With the only true difference being the contemporary use of the Cyrillic script in Moldova, as opposed to the Latin script used in Romania.

⁸ A good example of this was the decision to declare Moldovan, which most linguistics agree is at the very least a Romanian dialect and which many agree is interchangeable with Romanian, to be a distinct language (King, 1994 and Comai, 2015).

were already being discriminated against within the fledgling Moldovan state (Aklaev, 1996). As a result, both regions developed strong separatist movements. However, the situation would only escalate into an armed conflict in Transnistria, as the Moldovan government eventually reached an agreement with the Găgăuz people, by which they were eventually granted outright autonomy (Roper, 2010).

The third great issue pertaining to the war upon most scholars agree upon was the matter in which it was handled, both in its inception and during the actual conflict. By no means was the war regarded as 'inevitable'. In fact, the war seemed, in many ways, unthinkable and entirely unexpected if we look back as late as 1990. Yet, eventually, conflict became more and more likely, culminating in the March 2nd - July 21st 1992 war (Grecu, 2005). The war ended with a victory for Transnistria and its Russian supporters, as the region succeeded in repelling the forces of the Moldovan government, which had mobilized to cross the Dniester region and establish control of the region (Grecu, 2005). However, this is where the consensus ends, as both officials and scholars disagree much on the course of events that led up to the war, as well as the intentions of those involved.

Initial clashes took place as early as 1990 (Grecu, 2005) as a result of the initial ethnic tensions and sporadic fighting occurred from 1990 to 1992, albeit only fleetingly. The first shots fired, in 1990 were, according to Grecu's account, made by Moldovan forces, albeit the circumstances behind these initial clashes are, to Grecu's knowledge, unclear. However, the situation would only escalate in 1992. During this time, both Transnistria and Moldova attempted to consolidate their armed forces. Moldova had received support from both the Romanian government (Arbatov, 1997) and Romanian volunteers (Suhan, 2006), and Transnistria had received aid from both the Russian government (Ishiyama, 2003) and Cossack volunteers (Dobbs, 1992). Russian involvement was justified on the basis of protecting sovereignty, as was a typical practice of both Soviet and post-Soviet Russia involvements (Devyatkov, 2012). War would break out when Moldovan forces attempted, once more (Grecu, 2005), to cross the Dniester River at Dubăsari and Bendery on March 2nd 1992, where they were met by fierce opposition from the Transnistrian forces.

Though this sequence of events is well-documented, there exists a disagreement regarding the exact causes of this escalation of the conflict. Most point to the issue of the munitions left behind by the Soviet 14th Army as being the spark that ignited outright war. Dahl (2004) claims that the Moldovan Ministry of Defence had

moved to seize these munitions in 1992, so as to disarm the separatists and secure the entirety of Moldova's territory. Some suggest that the conflict broke out as an inevitable result of the build-up of troops in the region (Arbatov, 1997). Others point to the fact that March 2nd was also the date Moldova was officially recognized by the UN as a sovereign nation (King, 1994). Opting to go to war on this very same day would suggest that the Moldovan government had feared conflict in the absence of international recognition. Though the Moldovan government may have been planning to move military forces into the region and, thus, occupy Transnistria for some time, it may have chosen to wait for international recognition. This recognition would, in theory, protect Moldova from a potential Russian intervention or outright invasion, as the climate of the time suggested that such a thing would be highly unlikely⁹. Nevertheless, the Soviet 14th Army did enter the war and brought the conflict to a close, as Moldova would grudgingly accept *de facto* Transnistrian independence.

Yet, regardless of the actual course and causes of the war, important questions arise regarding its effects. Of these, the most discussed has been the stagnation of the Romanian-Moldovan reunification process, which continues to this day. Romania and Romanians undeniably took part in the conflict. The volunteers were, and have been, rather outspoken in their motives: "solidarity". (Aklaev, 1996 & Suhan, 2006). Of note is how the presence of significant numbers of Romanian volunteers in foreign conflicts is a historical oddity, even within the context of South-Eastern Europe. For example, there are almost no known cases of Romanians volunteering to fight in the Balkans Wars, which broke out after the Transnistrian war.

On the other hand, it is not exactly clear what the Romanian government's intentions were. The obvious answer has long been the desire for reunification (Heintz, King, Arbatov, as well as the overwhelming majority of participants and scholars, all taciturnly agree upon this). Yet, it must be pointed out that this is not an actual certainty, as the Romanian government officials, which were in power at time, have long avoided discussing what had transpired during the conflict in the corridors of power in Bucharest. Moreover, to this day, Romanian officials have tended to either dodge or, simply, ignore questions pertaining to the decision-making process that took place during the time of the Transnistrian War.

⁹ The UN, widely regarded as an institution of Western power, appeared likely to be powerful enough to deter any action undertaken by the collapsing Soviet Union.

However, it must be pointed out that the research question of this thesis may only truly be answered when the official Romanian state archives, pertaining to the conflict, are made public. Existing literature is, nevertheless, permeated by the underlying assumption that the Romanian intervention was motivated by a desire for the facilitation of a potential reunification. Latawski (1995), quaintly points to reunification as quintessential to the objectives of contemporary Romanian nationalism. Yet, whether these motives were rooted in solidarity or opportunism is a contentious issue, which draws polarizing opinions. However, even though scholars have not hesitated to discuss the strategy of the Romanian government at the time, almost none have questioned these intentions, which have always been assumed to have been irredentist in nature. As such, questioning the plausibility of the motives would fill a gap in the existing literature.

All in all, the literature is divided regarding the intentions of the actors involved in the Transnistrian war. However, there are certain elements on which most scholars agree. The ethnic background of the region cannot be disregarded, as the crisis that led to the war is a stock example of the auspices of the politics of identity. The conflict falls within the broader category of other conflicts related to the Cold War and the fall of the Soviet Union. Russian intervention was, most likely, motivated by a desire to maintain some degree of influence in the region. The Moldovan government wished to maintain control over the breakaway region, albeit the policies it employed may have been counterproductive. Romanian intervention was motivated by a widely recognized desire to pave the way to a potential reunification with Moldova, albeit how the Romanian government believed its intervention would aid these efforts is, at best, a contentious issue.

As such, one may pursue the question: exactly what outcome was the Romanian government hoping for as a result of the intervention? The widely accepted answer is reunification. However, it is possible that the government in Bucharest may have known that such a goal would ultimately be hindered by Russian intervention. Western support for both Romania and Moldova was by no means a guarantee¹⁰. Direct and open intervention in the conflict may have had brought both negative internal and external pressures on Romania. As such, it is entirely possible

¹⁰ Romania only joined NATO in March 2004, and the EU in January 2007. Moldova has not joined either organization, though such a course of action has been frequently discussed (Cebotari, 2010).

that the Romanian government may have realized that, in the short-term, reunification simply wasn't feasible, and adopted a policy of lukewarm support for the Moldovan government, in the hopes of garnering the sympathy of both the Moldovan government, and the Moldovan people. Such sympathy could be used as groundwork for a future reunification, in the result of a Moldovan victory in the war.

Chapter I

Background of the Conflict

Part I: A Short History of Transnistria

As Latawski notes, reunification with Moldova lies near the heart of Romanian national ambitions. In order to properly understand the complicated relationship between the two states, a summary foray into their mutual history is needed. To this end, this paper draws from a few well known books and essays that have been published on the topic of Romanian, Moldovan, Bessarabia, and Transnistrian history. The more noteworthy texts from which this chapter draws are Igor Cașu's *Nationalities Policy in Soviet Moldova*, Charles King's *The Moldovans: Romania, Russia, and the Politics of Culture* and Neagu Djuvara's *A Short History of Romanians*¹¹. Cașu's work chronicles the history of the Moldovan Soviet, yet also provides frequent historical information, particularly from the first half of 20th century. King's book provides a historical account of the relationship between Russia, Romania, and Moldova, throughout the last century, with a specific emphasis on international relations, as opposed to providing a simple historical account. Lastly, Neagu Djuvara's monolithic *magnum opus*, ironically titled, *A Short History of Romanians*, is a gigantic work written by Romania's most renowned and respected historian. The book chronicles the history of the Carpato-Danubian-Pontic region from obscure prehistory, to the modern day, and constitutes an indisputably accurate and impartial account of Romanian history.

The official birth of the Romanian state came in 1862, when the Moldovan politician Alexandru Ioan Cuza was elected *Domnitor*¹² of both the Romanian Principality of Wallachia, and the Romanian Principality of Moldova¹³. The resulting state was called the 'United Principalities of Moldova and Wallachia'¹⁴. It was a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, until its independence in 1878 when, with the aid of the Russian Empire, the Romanian state gained independence. Romania entered World War I on the side of the Entente, and gained the territories of Transylvania, Bukovina,

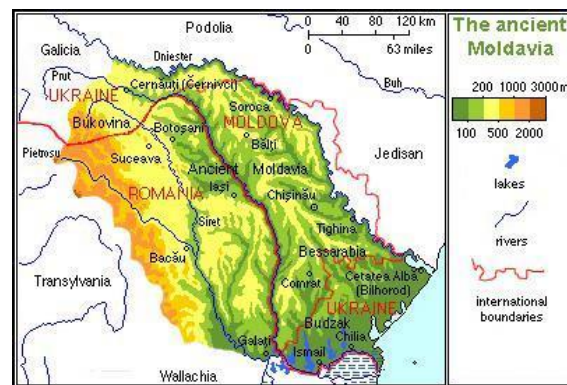
¹¹ In Romanian, *O Scurta Istorie a Romanilor*.

¹² „Ruler”; head of state.

¹³ which, at the time, did not include Bessarabia.

¹⁴ Until 1866, when the name was changed to *Romania*.

and Bessarabia. Unlike Transylvania, which was acquired from the defeated Austro-Hungarian Empire, Bukovina and Bessarabia were occupied by the Romanian army whilst Russia was preoccupied with the Russian Civil War. Representatives from these occupied territories decided to go ahead with unifying with Romania in 1918.



Map of the Historical Region of Moldavia

©New World Encyclopedia

This reunification led to the creation of, what is generally known as, *Romania Mare* (Greater Romania). It marked the greatest territorial extent of any independent Romanian state in history. This period between 1918 and 1940 is generally regarded by most Romanians as a *golden age*. The country prospered as a result of long-overdue industrialization. It should be noted, thus, that the unification of Romanian territories served as the fundamental building block of Romanian national identity. This period continues to have a very powerful connotation within the Romanian national *mythos*, to this day.

The historical region Moldova refers to the territory found along both banks of the river *Prut*. This river serves as the border between the Romanian state and the *Republic of Moldova*. The western half of the *region* of Moldova is found in Romania, and the eastern half is divided between the Republic of Moldova and the Ukraine. This is due to the fact that in 1806, Russia, sensing the weakness of the Ottoman Empire (i.e. *the Sick Man of Europe*), annexed the territory between the rivers Prut and Dniester (i.e. Bessarabia, the eastern half of the Principality of Moldova). Following the ensuing Russo-Turkish war of 1806-1812, a treaty was signed in Bucharest, which stipulated the formal cession of the territory of Bessarabia to Russia. This treaty is still referenced, typically by pro-Russian Moldovans, as forming the legal basis for Moldovan independence from Romania.

Following World War I and the outbreak of the Russian Civil War, Bessarabia broke away from Russia and was reunited with Romania as part of the Kingdom of Romania. The region would remain part of Greater Romania until 1940, when Romania ceded Bessarabia, Northern Bukovina, and the Hertza region to the Soviet Union, as part of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Just as with the Treaty of Bucharest, pro-Russians also point to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact as legal proof of separation

between Romania and Moldova, as well as those regions which currently belong to the Ukraine.

It is at this point that internal developments in interwar Romania must be noted. In the aftermath of the disastrous reign of King Charles II (1930-1940), Romania entered World War II on the side of the Axis. Romania lost Transylvania to Hungary, the *Cadrilater*



The Kingdom of Romania (1918-1940), with the Moldavian ASSR highlighted.

region to Bulgaria, and Bessarabia, Bukovina and the Herta region to the Soviet Union. Furthermore, the emergence of the fascist Iron Guard and the rise of a Romanian army officer, Ion Antonescu, who came to be the *de facto* head of state¹⁵ and taking up the title of *Conducător*¹⁶ (Deletant, 2006). Antonescu's regime would carry out the genocide of millions of Jews and Gypsies and would take part in Hitler's Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union. In exchange for its allegiance, Romania was granted control over Bessarabia, as well as the Soviet territory between the river Dniester and the Southern Bug River. This additional region was reorganized as the Transnistrian Governorate, while under Romanian control between 1941 and 1944.

As Deletant notes in his 2006 work, *Ion Antonescu: Hitler's Forgotten Ally, The Romanian alliance with Nazi Germany continues to cast a long shadow over regional politics to this day. A primary reason for this was the Holocaust carried out in Romanian-occupied territories. Following the end of WWII these territories were returned to the Soviet Union as was agreed upon in the 1947 Treaty of Paris. This was the last territorial change in Romanian history, barring only the formal concession of Snake Island by the Ukraine in 2009. Bessarabia, the Transnistrian Governorate, and Northern Bukovina remained part of the Soviet Union until 1991, when both Moldova and the Ukraine gained independence (King, 1999).*

As such, upon reviewing the history of the region, three facts must be taken into account which are of vital importance to any discussion surrounding the Transnistrian war within the context of relations between Romania, Moldova, and Russia. The first

¹⁵ Given the abdication of King Charles II in 1940, and the young age of King Michael I.

¹⁶ Meaning 'Leader' and echoing Hitler's own title of *Fuhrer*.



Map of fascist Romania, at its greatest territorial extent, with the Transnistrian Governorate shown.

is the fact that Bessarabia alone changed hands six times in the two centuries. First, from the Principality of Moldova to Tsarist Russia in 1806¹⁷, from the Russian Empire to the Kingdom of Romania in 1918, from the Kingdom of Romania to the Soviet Union in 1940, from the Soviet Union to the Kingdom of Romania in 1941, from the Kingdom of Romania to the Soviet Union in 1947¹⁸ and, finally, from the Soviet Union to the Republic of Moldova in 1991. The second important fact is the central role the unification of Romanian territories holds within the Romanian nation-building mythology. The third important fact is looming spectre of WWII Romanian fascism, which had placed emphasis on the importance on controlling 'Romanian' territories.

Furthermore, it must be noted that the region's history reveals three major international treaties which tend to be used to justify either Moldovan independence, or the illegitimacy of any Romanian territorial claims vis-a-vis territories beyond its current eastern border. These are the 1812 Treaty of Bucharest, the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and the 1947 Treaty of Paris. All of these are documents between both Russia and Romania, which stipulate the appurtenance of Bessarabia to either Russia or the Soviet Union.

¹⁷ Only formalized in 1812 by the Treaty of Bucharest.

¹⁸ The Soviet Army had been in *de facto* control of the region since 1944.

Part II: The Ethnic Dynamics of Transnistria

In order to explain the ethnic dynamics of Moldova, one must first define what constitutes Romanian, Moldovan, and Transnistrian identity. Thereafter, it is possible to explain how these ethnic identities have shaped the region and lead to the outbreak of the Transnistrian War, and how they have been used to justify both Romanian and Russian involvement.

Romanians identity is linked, not as much to ethnicity, as it is to language. This is due to the origins of the Romanian people, and Romanian nationalism. Romanians trace their history back to the conquest of Dacia by the Roman Empire in the second century CE. This conquest, and the subsequent policies of *Romanization*, resulted in the creation of the Latin *proto-Romanian* language. Over time, this language would evolve into what we now know as Romanian, the sole Latin language in Eastern Europe, with some noting that Romania is a “Latin island in a Slavic sea” (as was famously put by the Romanian historian, Nicolae Iorga)¹⁹. As such, when Romanian intellectual and political elites were confronted with the monumental task of artificially constructing a Romanian national identity in the 19th century, they focused intensely on language, as a differentiator between Romanians and non-Romanians.

As such, the lands where Romanian speakers historically lived were considered to be Romanian territories, even if they had never even been part of a Romanian state. This was a universal predicament, given that by the 19th century, Moldova, Dobruja and Wallachia were Ottoman vassals, the Banat and Transylvania were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and Bukovina and Bessarabia were ruled by the Russian Empire. As such, Romanian expansionism (which some have not hesitated to describe as “Romanian Imperialism”²⁰) has historically centred on the acquisition of territories inhabited by ‘Romanians’.

However, this strategy faced a predictable impediment in the guise of the multi-ethnic and multilingual communities found in these territories. Romania, to this day, has a large population of Romani people. Jews and Greeks were present in most Romanian towns and cities. Dobruja had historically large populations of Bulgarians,

¹⁹ This quote ignores the fact that Hungarians spoke a Finno-Ugric language.

²⁰ Tismaneanu (1999, pg. 9) notes how “Great Romanian Imperialism” was a common propagandistic trope used by the Soviet Union.

Turks, and Tartars. Transylvania, to this day, has many regions populated entirely by Hungarians and Germans. The Banat, part of the transnational *Greater Banat* region, was historically multi-ethnic, with numerous Serbian, Hungarian, and other ethnic groups smattered across the region. Finally, Moldova, particularly Bessarabia, was home to sizable Ukrainian, Russian, and Găgăuz minorities.

The overall ethnic makeup of each region remained roughly the same, until the outbreak of World War II. During the war, the Antonescu regime embarked on a campaign of ethnic cleansing against Jews, Roma, and Slavic peoples (Deletant, 2006). As a result of the Romanian Holocaust, Romania's once sizeable Jewish population was either exterminated or forced to flee the country. Following the war, the Jewish population shrunk to the point where only a few thousand remain today. Moreover, Germans were forced to leave the country after the end of WWII. Finally, the authorities of communist Romania would carry out a quiet, yet forceful, policy of homogenization by assimilation up until the fall of Ceausescu in 1989.

However, in Soviet Bessarabia, the exact opposite of homogenization occurred. Russian colonists were either brought or encouraged to settle in the region, particularly in the southern and eastern parts of the territory. In schools, children were taught the Russian language (Comai, 2015). The elites were compelled to learn Russian, as those who spoke the language achieved higher status within the party. This led to demographic shift occurring within the country. As a result, Moldova developed a sizeable Russian-speaking minority.

This mechanism occurred far more profoundly in Transnistria, where Russians, together with Ukrainians, made up a majority, a unique case within Moldova. Before WWII, "49 villages out of 67 between the Dniester and the Bug were Romanian" (Lozovan, 32). However, following the events that unfolded in the aftermath of the Axis invasion of the Soviet Union, a mass exodus of Romanians located east of the Dniester occurred, due to fear of Russian reprisals²¹. Cașu highlights how the Soviets union began a process of russification of the region by incentivizing ethnic Russian colonists to settle in the region, and by implementing a policy of linguistic favouritism of Russian.

Moreover, Eastern Moldova, specifically the region east of the river Dniester (which had been part of both Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union for more than a

²¹ Cașu points out that "thousands" of Romanians had been executed or sent to gulags in a time period ranging from the very beginning of Soviet reconquest of the area, all the way towards complete occupation by the end of the war.

century), possessed a heavy Russian influence to begin with. Over time, by merit of being part of the Soviet Union for almost half a century, Moldova developed a far more Slavic and, Russian identity. Romania, however, was able to maintain its own national identity, even while being under the Soviet sphere of influence, and a member of the Warsaw pact. This divergence resulted in the emergence of a Moldovan identity, which most would agree differs from a strictly Romanian identity.

However, a debate does persist when discussing the degree of difference. On the one hand, Romanian nationalists point towards the language spoken by the people of Moldova, which scholars agree is virtually interchangeable with Romanian. On the other hand, Moldovan nationalists point towards the region's unique history, independent of Romania. Moreover, due to the policies of the Soviet Union, and the population changes wrought on by World War II, a significant minority within Moldova identifies as ethnic Russian. This national minority makes up a majority in Transnistria.

Chapter II: *A Post-Soviet Conflict*

Part I: Developments in Russia and Russian Intervention

Between 1989 and 1991, one by one, Poland, East Germany, Romania, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and Bulgaria left the Warsaw Pact. The Soviet Union itself was dismantled into fifteen individual states. Suffice to say, of most interest to this thesis is the nature of Soviet and, later on, Russian foreign relations *vis-a-vis* Moldova, Romania, and Transnistria during the period of 1990 to 1992. As the Soviet Union fell apart, the Commonwealth of Independent States was founded (CIS), as a means of preserving some degree of Russian influence over the other former Soviet Republics.

This move took place during a crucial time frame in world history. The world was seeing the move from a bipolar world to a unipolar world, with the Soviet Union essentially losing superpower status. However, this did not mean that the Russian Federation²² did not desire to maintain some level of control over its “near abroad” (Cameron, 2013). This is also the fundamental point of view of Devyatkov (2012), who argues that most post-Soviet conflicts were motivated by the Russian state’s desire to maintain some degree of control over the former Soviet republics. Dobbs (1992) argues that the Transnistrian war, together with the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, are clear examples of this ambition.

Moscow’s desire to maintain control over the Russian *near abroad* has become obvious over the years, particularly following the rise of power of Vladimir Putin. However, this thesis is concerned with the period of time leading up to the Transnistrian War. We may safely surmise that, given the general consensus on the matter, Russian intervention in Transnistria was motivated by a desire maintain its influence and hinder Western influence. The official Russian explanation for intervention was simply a desire to end the conflict.

As such, the rational question follows: how did aiding the Transnistrian rebels help achieve this end? What could Moscow gain from ordering Alexander Lebed to

²² Which was officially born in 1991, the year before the conflict broke out.

seize command of the 14th Army and intervene in the conflict on the side of the Transnistrian forces? Lebed's orders were to "end the conflict" (Ozhiganov, 1997) and, thus, establish another post-Soviet break-up "frozen conflict". Devyatkov, Arbatov, and several of Arbatov's contributors suggest that Moscow, whilst experiencing the collapse of the Soviet Union, sought to maintain some level of influence in the former Soviet republic of Moldova, in the aftermath of Moldovan independence. 'Freezing' the conflict meant that reunification between Moldova and Romania would become highly unlikely. The Romanian government at the time, was openly courting the Western powers and appeared to be clearly heading towards Western alignment (Sedelmeier, 2013). Moscow perceived a potential union with Moldova as a further loss of influence.

The official explanation given, was that the intervention was meant to prevent further bloodshed. However, this explanation, though feasible, does not explain why, in March 1992, before the war began, the supreme commander of the CIS, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, authorized the transfer of military equipment from the Soviet 14th Army, stationed in Transnistria, to the local Transnistrian government (Azrael, 1996). It also does not explain why Russian President Boris Yeltsin began transferring personnel from the Soviet 14th Army to the Transnistrian rebels (Azrael, 1996). Moreover, "80% of the officer corps were from the Transdniestri region, and some of them joined the Transdniestri forces" (Arbatov, 1997, pg. 178). If Russia's goal had been to prevent further conflict by intervening, then the fact that Russian intervention took place on behalf of the rebels it had previously armed appears quite dubious indeed. As a result, the hypothesis put forth by Dobbs, Jacobs, Devyatkov, and Arbatov appears to be more credible: Russian intervention, throughout the entirety of the developments that took place between 1990 and 1992 in Transnistria, were motivated by a desire to maintain some level of influence in the region.

As such, we may easily conclude that the direct goal of the Russian government during that time was to prevent a Moldo-Romanian victory in the war. Such a victory would likely lead to a future political union which would lead to a loss of influence in its periphery, due to Romania's Western alignment. Russian intervention occurred in the form of military support provided to the Transnistrians, in the form of weapons, personnel, and, ultimately, military intervention, followed by an intentional "freezing" of the conflict. As a result, we may note the stark difference between the intensity of Russian intervention, as opposed to the lukewarm support provided by Romania, to its Moldovan allies.

Part II: Developments in Romania and Romanian Intervention

Romania was also undergoing its own period of political change and, as a result, a fair amount of political instability, in the aftermath of the fall of communism. Nicolae Ceausescu had ruled Romania since 1965, when he succeeded the first communist leader of Romania, Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej, as General Secretary of the Communist Party of Romania. There was an initial period of modernization and relative prosperity, as well as popularity amongst the Romanian public and an exceptional international standing²³.

However, the Romanian economy would eventually begin to stagnate. According to Ban (2012), this was largely due to Ceausescu's obsession with paying of *all* of Romania's foreign debt. The regime employed exceptionally harsh austerity measures which lead to an economic recession, widespread poverty and hunger, as well as visible decreased consumption (Ban, 2012). Throughout this time, Ceausescu, high-ranking communist officials, and the members infamous *Securitate* (secret police) enjoyed luxurious lifestyles, which only served to draw the ire of the Romanian population.

Throughout the 1980s, support for the regime would begin to decline. In December of 1989, a popular uprising began in the western city of Timisoara in support of Hungarian Catholic cleric László Tőkés. The uprising would reach Bucharest on December 21st, when Ceausescu called for a massive rally with over one hundred thousand participants be held. His plan of condemning the uprising in Timisoara and reaffirming his authority failed. The assembled crowd turned on him and, a few days later, on the morning of Christmas Day, Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife, Elena Ceausescu, were executed by firing squad. The couple had been found guilty of several crimes by a military tribunal made up of high-ranking members of the Romanian military and security apparatus. They had defected to the revolutionary forces, and Ceausescu couple accused them of being illegitimate. With their execution being broadcast on national television, the Romanian Revolution formally ended.

The FSN, which organized democratic elections on May 20th 1990 for both the

²³ Though a member of the Warsaw Pact and a formal ally of Moscow, Ceausescu drew much acclaim from the West following his decision to not participate in the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia.

state legislative body and the presidency, comfortably won both. This was largely due to the fact that the FSN had virtually no opposition (Siani-Davies, 2005). However, a rift soon emerged between the FSN's two leading figures: President Ion Iliescu and Prime Minister Petre Roman. This rift would be formalized in 1993, when the FSN split into two parties, which would move on to become the modern Social Democratic Party (PSD) and the modern National Liberal Party (PNL).

However, the cracks are known to have emerged far earlier than 1993. It must be noted that the Romanian state would only be considered a functioning democracy by the 2000s, largely due to the influence of the European Union (Sedelmeier, 2013). Up until then, it would be more apt to view the Romanian state as a fragile democracy at best, or an unstable authoritarian regime, at worst. As such, the Romanian state would have been far more concerned with stability, in the years following 1989, more than anything else (Siani-Davies, 2005). With this in mind, it must be underlined that any other objective was secondary.

Within the context of the Transnistrian War, it is of vital importance to point out that the entirety of the conflict (including the earliest clashes) took place between 1990 and 1992, a time during which Romania found itself fraught with instability. As such, grandiose political projects, such as a potential reunification with Moldova, though having much popular support, were left on hold, as the new government struggled to keep the country from descending into further political violence, as well as both placating Russia and courting the West.

Knowing this, the underwhelming support provided by the Romanian government to the Moldovan government is understandable. Romania was, after all, simply a small nation attempting to maintain some level of stability in the aftermath of what could basically be described as a short civil war. Any other objective, even if it be a long-awaited political union with Moldova, would take a backseat to maintaining stability. Furthermore, we can only barely claim that Romania was a unitary actor, given the fractious nature of the political power at the time.

Given the presumably authoritarian nature of early post-Revolutionary Romania (Sedelmeier, 2013), it may be inferred that said political elite was fully aware of how fragile the Romanian state must have been. Though the break-up of the FSN was yet to occur, common sense alone would suggest that, behind closed doors, a factionalized political elite was well aware of the strenuous nature of their political standing. Furthermore, the idea of political instability hindering Romanian-Moldovan

relations in the 1990s is in no way a new concept. Heintz (2005) notes how the official Romanian position *vis-a-vis* Moldova is that both countries should prioritize their own internal development, before broaching the topic of a potential political union.

As such, it may be concluded that, despite public support for a potential reunification with Moldova (Heintz, 2005), there was nowhere near enough political will to support a large-scale military intervention in the Transnistrian conflict. Romania had recently traversed its own period of civil conflict and, given our knowledge of the future fragmentation of the, then, ruling political union, we may infer that there must have existed a belief that such an intervention might lead to renewed internal strife within the country.

Part III: The Transnistrian War and its Aftermath

“According to official data, the first days of fighting alone saw more than 500 killed, and roughly 80,000 inhabitants forced to flee their homes” (Arbatov, 1997, pg. 178). Despite the aforementioned minor clashes that occurred beginning with 1990, the conflict only began in earnest on March 2nd 1992. The principal battlegrounds corresponded with crossing points of the river Dniester; of which most well-known were Dubăsari and Bendery, where the heaviest fighting occurred. Ultimately, a ceasefire was reached on July 21st, when both Mircea Snegur²⁴ and Igor Smirnov²⁵ agreed to stop fighting in the aftermath of Russia’s decision to formally intervene militarily to stop the fighting. The battle lines that existed at the time of the ceasefire morphed into the current borders between Transnistria and the rest of Moldova.

Most sources agree that the Moldovan government forces appeared to be gaining the upper hand by June 23rd. On this date, the commander-in-chief of the CIS²⁶ Armed Forces, Yevgeny Shaposhnikov, ordered the replacement of the commanding officer of the 14th Soviet Army, General Yakovlev, with General Major Alexander Lebed. It was under Lebed that the Soviet 14th Army formally entered the war. The intervention turned the tide of the war, particularly in the aftermath of the July 3rd bombardment of Moldovan forces by the Soviet artillery. Whilst Yakovlev had

²⁴ President of Moldova from 1990 to 1997.

²⁵ President of Transnistria from 1991 to 2011.

²⁶ The *Commonwealth of Independent States*.

openly supported the rebels (Arbatov, 1997), Lebed appeared to have been more impartial. His orders, after all, were to stop the conflict. When asked about his actions and motives during the war, he once responded that he "told the hooligans [separatists] in Tiraspol and the fascists [government] in Chişinău -- either you stop killing each other, or else I'll shoot the whole lot of you with my tanks." (Meier, 2011).

This quote quaintly summarizes the official position of the Russian government and the CIS, both of which motivated the 14th Army's intervention as being meant to protect ethnic Russians and Ukrainians living in Transnistria from fighting between the "fascist" government of the independent Moldova and the "hooligan" rebels. However, the rebels, though frequently castigated by official Russian rhetoric, were never prosecuted or punished, in any form. Moreover, prior to the arrival of Lebed at the helm of the Soviet forces, the 14th Army had openly provided both personnel and weaponry to the Transnistrian rebel forces. Lastly, despite claiming to be impartial and having solely the goal of "ending the conflict", it should be noted that Lebed only assaulted Moldovan forces, and never Transnistrian positions.

Regardless of whether or not we take Russia's objectives as being to maintain influence, as is widely believed by most scholars (such as Devyatkov, Aklaev, and Arbatov, for example) or to simply end the conflict (as is the official position of the Russian government), it must be accepted that said objective was achieved. The ceasefire between Moldova and Transnistria has held to this day, Moldova has been unable to join NATO (Cebotari, 2010), and hypothetical reunification with Romania has become more and more unlikely with each passing year.

However, what of the objectives which the Romanian government aimed to achieve through intervention? To answer this question, we must, once more, highlight the fact that Romania's contribution to the Moldovan war effort was light, at best. There were a few Romanian volunteers that fought on the side of the Moldovan government (Suhan, 2006), which do not count as Romanian government forces, given that they were made up of civilians that had journeyed to Moldova on their own accord. Arbatov explains how the Romanian government provided the Moldovan government with weaponry, ammunition, and armed vehicles, as well as with military advisors serving in noncombat roles. Unlike, Russia, Romania never committed to an actual military intervention.

However, what is certain is that Romania supported the losing side of the war, as the Moldovan government, through the acceptance of the July 21st ceasefire,

essentially surrender control of part of its territory. Transnistria retains *de facto* independence to this day, and has passionately pursued a policy of Russification and continued de-Romanianization (Comai, 2015). What's more is the fact that a hypothetical Moldo-Romanian reunification never came to pass. As such, we may draw the conclusion that, regardless of whether or not Romania's objective was to support its neighbour or to seek reunification, it seemed to have, nevertheless, failed in achieving the either objective, regardless of which was the one that motivated its intervention in the war.

Conclusion

The state of Moldova finds itself within the historical region of Bessarabia, and is made up of the Eastern half of the greater Moldovan region, with the Western half being part of Romania. Bessarabia was annexed by the Russian Empire, during the waning years of the Ottoman Empire. Since the 1812 Treaty of Bucharest, the region has traded hands a total of six times, mostly between the Romanian and Russian states. This two-centuries long back-and-forth eventually culminated with the independence of the Republic of Moldova in 1990.

However, all was not well following the country's independence. Due to the diverse ethnic makeup of the region, problems emerged. At first, the Găgăuz people of Moldova, sought to obtain greater autonomy from the central government in Chişinău, which they achieved by, more-or-less, peaceful means. However, when the Russophile peoples of Transnistria embarked upon a similar process, the result was a civil war that took place between March and July 1992.

Foreign actors intervened in this conflict. Romania aided the Moldovan central government, while Russia aided the Transnistrian rebels. Russia officially claimed that it intervened to prevent an escalation of the conflict, prevent more bloodshed, and protect Russian lives. However, due to the fact that Russia supported the Transnistrian rebels before the war with weapons, munitions, and personnel, during the war by military intervention against the Moldovans, most scholars believe that intervention was motivated primarily by a desire to maintain some degree of influence in the region.

Romanian intervention was motivated by a belief that a political union with Moldova might result from a successful intervention in the conflict, on the side of the Moldovan government. Intervention was motivated by a certain aspect of the Romanian national *mythos*. An integral part of Romanian nationalism is the belief that all the territories that have been historically inhabited by Romanians, should be part of a unitary sovereign state. A "dream" of a single sovereign Romanian state (*Greater Romania*), encompassing all historically Romanian territories, had been achieved in the period known as the *Interbellum* (i.e. the Kingdom of Romania, as it existed between 1918 and 1939). Ever since the appropriation of the territory known as Bessarabia, by the Soviet Union, there has been a perceived sense of a national "loss",

which many in Romania would wish to see recovered.

The official claim of the Romanian government was that it provided aid provided to the Moldovan government as a sign of neighbourly solidarity. However, it may easily be understood why the existing academic literature on the Transnistrian War is dominated by a certainty that the intention of the Romanian government was to facilitate a future political union with Moldova. Romanian intervention in the conflict is, thus, framed as part of a policy that would culminate in the reacquisition of its former territory, through an eventual political union. Yet, given the political developments that had taken place in Romania naught but a few years earlier (i.e. the Romanian Revolution), it becomes apparent that such a policy would only be possible if it did not lead to further political instability within Romania.

Moreover, it is problematic to even speak of the existence of a clear “Romanian intention” during the timeframe in question. Given that Romania had experienced violent regime change naught but a couple of years before the outbreak of the Transnistrian War, the perception of *Romania* as a stable, unitary actor is questionable. That is to say that, despite it being true that there did exist much popular support for a potential policy of reunification with Moldova, the fragmented and unstable nature of Romania’s government, at the time, made carrying out such a policy rather difficult, particularly if it would have cause instability.

This thesis set out to challenge a long held belief: that Romanian intervention in the Transnistrian War of 1992 was not motivated solely by a desire to achieve an eventual political union between the two countries. The question was asked, *what were the reasons behind Romania’s intervention in the Transnistrian War?* However, upon asking this question, one encounters the harsh reality that the reason why both politicians and scholars alike have rarely bothered to speculate upon any alternative explanations, has been due to the plausibility of their initial assessment. IT would appear that Romania’s intervention seems to have indeed, been motivated by the desire to pave the way for a future political union with Moldova. However, what this thesis suggests is that reunification with Moldova was not the Romanian governments’ main objective. The primary objective of the Romanian government, seems to have been to keep the country from falling apart as a result of renewed political violence.

This conclusion would also explain why Romanian intervention in the war was so remarkably light. Intervention was required due to a Romanian desire for a political union, yet political instability at home limited the scope of the intervention. However

the Transnistrian rebels were not defeated, and the ceasefire agreement reached by the two sides has made a potential reunification almost impossible. As such, we may note that, clearly, the intervention failed to win the war, yet succeeded in maintain political stability in Romania..

Overall, this thesis concludes that the current paradigm surrounding the Transnistrian conflict appears to hold true. As has always been assumed, Romanian intervention was, as far as this thesis is concerned, motivated by the pursuit of a potential political union between Moldova and Romania. Russian intervention appears to have been motivated by a desire to maintain some degree of influence in the region. However, despite the desire for reunification, Romania's government appears to have been far more concerned with keeping the existing country together, rather than expanding territorially. As a result, it intervened only lightly in the conflict, since it valued maintaining political stability at home, over a hypothetical reunification.

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