

CONFLICTING IDENTITIES: MOLDOVA AND THE SECESSIONIST TRANSNISTRIA REPUBLIC

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This quotation from Igor Smirnov, President of the Dnestr republic, is used by Dov Lynch¹ in his book *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS* to argue that the Transdnestr conflict had little to do with ethnic hatred between Moldovans and ethnic Slavs. What truly lay behind these clashes, Lynch argues, was the progressive loss of prestige and predominance of the ruling Russian elite in favour of politicians of Bessarabian origin. This trend was especially visible on the left bank of the *Dnestr* River where people of Slav origin, such as Russians and Ukrainians, controlled most industrial and economic resources. The Transnistria Russian elite saw the rise of Moldavian nationalism² during Gorbachev's *glasnost* as a direct threat to their authority. According to Lynch it was this perceived challenge to their privileged position that ultimately drove them towards secessionism from Moldova, and to proclaiming the union of the Transnistria republic with the USSR on September 2, 1990. Whilst Lynch's approach offers reasons for the conflict it does not go far enough. This article will argue that the fundamental nature of this conflict went further and deeper than the mere loss of political and economic power.

What moves someone to hold a weapon and use it against a group of people who until then had been their fellow citizens is something that in the case of Moldova cannot be explained by myths of ancient hates suddenly being awoken, or by living memories of past wars. Rather, the ethnic Russians' fear was caused by mistrust of Moldavian nationalism, which they believed would have made them second-class citizens through

¹ Lynch, Dov (2000), *Russian Peacekeeping Strategies in the CIS: The Cases of Moldova, Georgia, and Tajikistan* (London and New York: MacMillan Press and RIIA), p. 112

² It should be noted that the name Moldova was chosen instead of Moldavia, which is the northern Rumanian region bordering the former SSR of Moldova, when independence was declared on August 27, 1991. Moldavian nationalism defended union with Rumania and was opposed to an independent Moldova. On the other hand Moldovan nationalism supported the idea of an independent Moldova.

its ultimate goal of unification with Romania. This was the background against which the process of replacing Communist ‘nationalism’ (based on political ideology) with Russian ethno-nationalism was set in motion, during the early period of Yeltsin’s term in office. However, confusion arose throughout the former USSR over the role of factors such as language, religion, ideology, territory, race, and history.

After seventy years of Communism the majority of ethnic Russians believed that the borders of the USSR were the same as those of Russia. The fact that after the ‘Great Patriotic War’ Stalin made ensured that the USSR’s new borders corresponded to those of the pre-1917 Tsarist Empire³ revealed the extent to which Russians identified themselves with the Tsarist fatherland. This perception was also shared by the soldiers of the Red Army who having fought against Nazi Germany throughout the territories of the Ukraine, Belarus, Lithuania, and so on, believed that they had earned the land and saw the whole Soviet State as their ‘homeland’. Memories of the large scale losses and sacrifices suffered while fighting Hitler are probably the most important source for the creation of the Soviet-Russian identity. These collective memories of wartime endurance were essential to ethnic Russians living outside Russia proper in the late 1980s, who were suddenly faced with the spread of autochthonous nationalism. This increased their sense of being a ‘foreigner’ in what they had always regarded as their own land.⁴ During the first two years of the 1990s Russian society witnessed its own sudden collapse from almighty super-power to disintegrating state. The break down of the Eastern European Communist regimes throughout 1990 was regarded by large sections of the Army and political establishment as the first step towards the collapse of political unity and the fragmentation of the USSR. This prospect was particularly terrifying for the estimated 25-35 million ethnic Russians living outside proper Russia, who would soon find “themselves living in newly independent states controlled by governments seeking a firm break with [anything vaguely reminiscent of Russia]”.⁵

Russians living both in Russia and the peripheral Soviet republics were always told by Communist propaganda how envied and hated they were by the West. However,

³ With the exception of Finland, and the Polish territories east of the Curzon Line.

⁴ Dunlop, John (1993), ‘Russia: Confronting a loss of Empire’, in Ian Bremmer and Ray Taras, eds., *Nation and politics in the Soviet successor states* (Cambridge: CUP), p. 47

⁵ Melvin, Neil (1995), *Russians Beyond Russia: The Politics of National Identity* (London: RIIA), p. 5

they were completely unprepared to deal with anti-Russian demonstrations coming from all directions within the former USSR and Eastern Europe, where they were being “[...] blamed for all the grievances, uncertainties and disorientations which so many [felt] after forty years [...]”.⁶ The vacuum left by the internationalist Soviet system was being divided up and filled with scores of different proto-nationalistic movements, many of which made use of violent anti-Russian rhetoric. This xenophobic⁷ tendency exacerbated the Russians’ sense of insult, and further intensified their worries about the intentions of the non-Russian ethnicities living inside the Russian Federation, which was “[...] home to more than one hundred different nationalities [...]”⁸. Inevitably, the Russians’ understanding of their own identity was strengthened and influenced by the feeling of widespread rejection from the former Soviet territories, which in its turn had a detrimental effect on relations between the new Russian Federation (RF) and these secessionist states. This relationship was especially difficult in new countries such as Moldova, which was home to hundreds of thousands of ethnic Russians and Ukrainians.

The violent collapse of Ceacescu’s regime in 1990 brought news of Romanian led attacks on ethnic Hungarians in Timisoara, Transylvanian, and other cities. Ethnic Russians in Moldova had reasons to fear similar reprisals, which would have resulted from the possible reunification of Moldova with Rumania. Furthermore, events in Yugoslavia were showing to the world that a multi-ethnic society was not viable without a strong authoritarian regime such as the USSR. This unease was not only a product of the situation in Moldova but rather a common feeling amongst Russophile populations based outside the RF, as can be deduced from the 1993 study undertaken at Moscow’s Centre for Public Opinion Research. In the report it was estimated that in 1992 alone, at least 17.9 percent of ethnic Russians living in the Baltic States, Moldova, Georgia, and Armenia seemed to be planning to emigrate from their new states.⁹ Ethnic Russians living in Moldova feared that they would loose their culture through emigration, and as early as the 1980s, this fear also exacerbated their ‘being-expelled

⁶ Hobsbawn, E. J. (1992), *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: CUP-Canto), p. 174

⁷ “Dislike of the stranger, the outsider, and reluctance to admit him into one’s own group”. See Kedourie, Elie (1993), *Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers), p. 68

⁸ Brown, Archie (1997), *The Gorbachev Factor* (Oxford and New York: OUP), p. 253

⁹ Guroff, Gregory and Guroff, Alexander (1994), ‘The Paradox of Russian National Identity’, in Roman Szporluk, ed., *National Identity and Ethnicity in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, Vol. 2 (Armond, NY, and London: M.E. Sharpe), p. 92

paranoia', once more proving the fact that "when society fails, the nation appears as the ultimate guarantee".¹⁰ The Transnistrian leadership's use of nationalism to consciously preserve positions of power transformed an essentially economic and political problem into a conflict based on the defence of ethnic identity.

The reasons that have been used to justify the conflict in political and economic terms include the fact that this Eastern area contained a third of Moldova's industrial potential, was home to the only electrical power stations providing 82 percent of Moldova's energy requirements, and that the gas pipeline supplying Moldova's capital was controlled from Transnistria's capital, Tiraspol.¹¹ In addition, some academics have cited the fact that 70 percent (390,000) of ethnic Russians lived in Moldova, while only some 170,000 lived in the Transdnestr republic, suggesting that this could not have been an ethnically motivated conflict because the Russians living on the east bank of the Dnestr river were in the minority.¹² However, the role played by civic organizations such as the Communist 'Women's Strike Committee' which played a very active role in mobilising the Transdnestr Russian population in the repeated seizure of arms from the 14th Army weapons depots, seemed to have been motivated more by Russian-Soviet patriotism than by economic or political factors. Furthermore, the formation of the Transnistrian 'Women's Guard', a body mainly comprised the wives of active and retired military officers, also shows the inspirational effect Russian nationalism had on politically impotent people. The ethnic essence of Transnistrian Russians' concerns was illustrated once again in the strikes of September 1989 organised by the United Council of Work Collectives in Tiraspol, Bendery and Rybnitsa to protest against the Moldovan Popular Front's decision to replace Cyrillic with Latin script.

Another important factor to take into account when analysing this conflict is the Soviet 14th Army, formerly under the jurisdiction of the USSR's Odessa military

¹⁰ Hobsbawn, E. J. (1992), p. 173

¹¹ Brawer, Moshe (1994), *Atlas of Russia and the Independent Republics* (New York: Simon & Schuster), p. 59

¹² Waters, Trevor (1997), 'Problems, Progress and Prospects in a Post-Soviet Borderland: The Republic of Moldova', *IBRU Boundary and Security Bulletin*, Vol. 5, No. 1, p. 73 The ethnic mix on the left bank comprised 40.1 percent Moldovans, followed by 28.3 percent Ukrainians, and only 25.5 percent Russians, who therefore constituted a minority within their own Transnistria republic.

district. It had been stationed in Moldova since the 1950s as a base from where it could quickly intervene in the Balkans if necessary. The support of the Transnistria's forces by elements of the 14th Army can be seen as a reflection of the contradictions and doubts which the Russians were experiencing during the secessionist turmoil of 1991. By 1990 the strength of the 14th Army had been greatly diminished following Gorbachev's army reductions during the late 1980s. Of the two divisions remaining only the 59th Guards Motor Rifle Division retained most of its original combat power. Although the 14th Army did not influence events by directly intervening on behalf of the secessionist republic, they were nevertheless important because of the vital assistance some elements gave to the rebel authorities, who were attempting to create an armed force capable of confronting and defeating the Moldovan forces. This assistance involved the distribution of light and heavy weaponry to the 'Transnistria Guard' (DG), following its creation on September 2 1991, supplying military advisers and providing intelligence gathered using the 14th Army's monitoring facilities and reconnaissance aircraft.¹³ Without all this assistance, this newly created republic would have been unable to survive as an independent political entity,

This unofficial supply of military aid cannot be explained by links to Moscow. The 14th Army command was not receiving any orders to actively assist the rebel authorities during the first Transnistria-Moldova confrontations¹⁴, as the replacement of Lt. Gen. Yakovlev by Col. Gen. Yuri Netkachev during late January 1992 confirms. As commander of the 14th Army, Yakovlev had strongly supported the secessionist republic by agreeing to lead the Transnistria Directorate for Defence and Security. Conversely his replacement was "a Bielorussian and [as] a supporter of plans for Bielorussian armed forces, [...] was more sympathetic to the idea of a Moldovan army".¹⁵ Instead, it seems that the reasoning behind the assistance is contained in the following remark made by a young lieutenant serving with the 14th Army: "Who are we, to whom are we subordinated, which state are we defending?".¹⁶ The answers to these questions give an

¹³ Socor, Vladimir (1992), 'Russia's Fourteenth Army and the Insurgency in Eastern Moldova', *RFE/RL Research Report*, Vol. 1, No. 36, p. 42

¹⁴ The first heavy fighting broke out in Dubossar on December 13-15, 1991, following the Moldavian parliament's order to force the disarming of the National Guard, as well as to arrest the organizers of the parliamentary elections and independence referendum in Transnistria.

¹⁵ Orr, Michael (1992), '14th Army and the Crisis in Moldova', *Jane's Intelligence Review*, Vo. 4, No. 6, p. 249

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

unmistakable insight into the essence of this conflict. Once the USSR ceased to exist and it was no longer clear who they answered to, the only thing they had left was their identity, their feeling of being Russian.¹⁷ The soldiers who helped the rebels seem therefore to have done so of their own volition because they believed, as Russians, that it was the right thing to do. This helps to explain the ethnic essence of this conflict; the Russian citizens and soldiers who found themselves living in the new political entity of Moldova, defined and governed primarily by pro-Romanian politics, built the pro-Russian Transnistria republic to defend their own identity.

When Moldova's pro-Romanian parliament decided to solve the conflict by using armed force, this compounded the fears of ethnic Russians in Moldova and the Russian Federation. Such concerns led to Russian Federation (RF) Vice-President Aleksandr Rutskoi visiting the Transnistria republic in early April 1992. This trip, not authorised by the Moldovan government, gives a clear insight into how ethno-nationalism was affecting RF policies. Inconsistencies between Kozyrev's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and its vision of a peaceful, respectful relationship between the RF and the newly independent former Soviet republics, and Gen. Grachev's Ministry of Defence, who insisted that the Russian armed forces were obliged to protect the 'Russian diasporas', quickly evolved towards a shared policy concerning the Russian 'near-abroad'. The belief in Russia that 'genocidal' attacks were being committed against ethnic Russians living abroad pressured the RF leadership to intervene, "so that the people of the [*Pridnestrovskaya Moldovaksya Respublika*]", as Rutskoi argued, "can gain independence and defend it".¹⁸ This rapid and radical change of policy was significant in the formulation of Russian military doctrine during mid-1992 when, for the first time, a clause regarding the "[protection of] rights and interests of Russian citizens and persons abroad, connected with it ethnically and culturally"¹⁹ was included as one of the main objectives of the Russian Federation Armed Forces. The eventual decision of the MFA to side with the nationalistic patriotism of the RF High Command came as a direct effect of the "independent 14A actions [as well as from] intense

¹⁷ It cannot be forgotten that Russian patriotism at this historical time was powerfully attached to the pride of being Soviet. After all Russian armed forces have retained strong links to the Soviet era, such as the army newspaper "Red Star".

¹⁸ Lynch, Dov (2000), p. 115

¹⁹ Holcomb, James (1992), 'Russian Military Doctrine – Structuring for the Worst Case', *Jane's Intelligence Review* Vol. 4, No. 12, p. 531

domestic pressure”.²⁰ The practical outcome of this in Moldova was the appointment of Col. Gen. Aleksandr Lebed as commander of the 14th Army on 27th June 1992.

As commander of the 14th Army from late June 1992 to June 1995 Lebed illustrates how the confusion and disorientation caused by the collapse of the USSR influenced how the military perceived its role. This highly indoctrinated Soviet establishment was in deep shock following the breakdown of military dogmas such as the indivisibility of Russia and the USSR, also the blow to its pride of no longer being a super-power and the sense of constantly being insulted and mistrusted both by the West and by its ‘own’ former comrades. Lebed represented the type of officer who, after extensive fighting in Afghanistan as commander of a landing force battalion between 1981 and 1982, had become disillusioned with the Soviet leadership and its Afghan imbroglio. He saw the 14th Army as the only defence standing between a possible ‘genocide’ and some sort of regional stability, “pointing to the Soviet pullout of Afghanistan to describe a probable scenario for [Moldova]”.²¹ This is why he passionately committed himself to the protection of ethnic Russians and was unwilling to abandon ‘his’ 14th Army soldiers who he believed belonged “to the Transnistrian people”.²² It seems that what ultimately defined Russian identity was an incongruous mixture of ethnic Slavism, language, and Tsarist and Soviet history. These contradictions are still very much in evidence today as illustrated by “[...] President Vladimir Putin’s preference [to continue with the] use of the Russian double-headed eagle and the music of the Soviet anthem.”²³ By describing the Transnistrian republic as a “piece of Russia” surrounded by “a collection of abnormal states”, Lebed also affirmed his belief that Bielorrussians, Ukrainians, and Russians were “Slavs, people of one root, as well as language, [who] understand each other without an interpreter, [and share] the same fate and the same faith”.²⁴ This paradoxical definition of Russian identity did not differ greatly from that being expressed by many right-wing politicians

²⁰ Lynch, Dov (2000), p. 116

²¹ Simonsen, S. G. (1995), ‘Going His Own Way: A Profile of General Aleksandr Lebed’, *Journal of Slavic Military Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, p. 532

²² Waters, Trevor (1996), p. 399

²³ Kuzio, Taras, ‘Russian National Identity and Foreign Policy Towards the “Near Abroad”’, *Prism*, Vol. 8, No. 4

²⁴ Simonsen, S. G. (1995), p. 534

within the RF who demanded the return of ‘Russian’ lands following the disintegration of the USSR.

The success of the Transnistrian republic leadership in attracting and mobilising its Russian population, including those serving at the time in the 14th Army, can only be explained by the ‘awakening’ of an underlying Russian identity. Having witnessed the disappearance of the USSR as a state, ethnic Russians turned to their mental and emotional perception of Russian nationhood for orientation. The new Moldovan government may have believed itself to be following the Wilsonian dictum that nation is defined by territory and language, however, the Transnistrian Russians equally believed they could reassure themselves with the same logic. Furthermore, the armed conflicts in Georgia, Azerbaijan, and Moldova during 1991 and 1992 inevitably also affected the Russians communities living there, stimulating the formation of a new post-Soviet Russian identity, and at the same time influencing the Russian Federation’s foreign and military policy. All these factors provide a basis on which to understand the Transnistrian conflict as an essentially ethnic conflict, rather than a political or economic struggle. Without this clear perception of belonging to a separate Russian ethnicity, language, religion, and collective historical memory, as opposed to that of Moldavian origin, this conflict have not even existed.