

## THE RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV PACT AND THE NATIONAL HISTORY MUSEUM OF ROMANIA<sup>1</sup>

### PACTUL RIBBENTROP-MOLOTOV ȘI MUZEUL NAȚIONAL DE ISTORIE A ROMÂNIEI

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**Abstract:** Articolul prezintă modul în care statul român a fost bulversat de efectele Pactului Ribbentrop-Molotov în momentul rapturilor teritoriale suferite în anul 1940. În procesul de organizarea a unui Muzeu Național de Istorie a României, propaganda comunistă a fost factorul decisiv în prezentarea istoriei românilor.

Ideologizarea istoriei a reprezentat un apanaj al tuturor regimurilor autoritare, iar cel communist, impus în țările din Centrul și Sud-Estul Europei de către Uniunea Sovietică, a excelat în transformarea istoriei antice, medii, moderne și contemporane într-un mijloc de propaganda, fără a oferi vreun rol adevărului istoric.

Pactul Ribbentrop-Molotov nu a fost menționat măcar în expozițiile Muzeului de Istorie a României din perioada comunistă, dar a fost publicat parțial în anul 1974, ecouri ale efectelor sale fiind prezentate până în momentul 1988 – 1989, când a fost denunțat de către Nicolae Ceaușescu.

**Keywords:** the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, the Romanian communist regime, the National History Museum of Romania, Ceaușescu's dictatorship, propaganda and agitation.

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1939, just a few days before the beginning of the Second World War, the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was signed. Books which could fill entire libraries were written about the propagandistic role and the actual effects of this act on the evolution of Central and South-Eastern Europe throughout several

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at The International Scientific Conference „The Pact for War. The Collusion of 23 August 1939 between Hitler and Stalin from a Contemporary Perspective. 80 years after the outbreak of the Second World War” held at Museum of Second World War, Gdansk, 23 - 24 August 2019 <https://muzeum1939.pl/en/international-scientific-conference-entitled-pact-war-collusion-23-august-1939-between-hitler-and/2633.html>. The authors would like to thank Ms. Alexandra Mărășoiu, counselor at the National History Museum of Romania, for translating the text from Romanian into English.

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decades. The secret annex, discovered by world historiography much later, by means of a copy kept at the state archives of the Federal Republic of Germany, divided into spheres of influence limitrophe countries or those in the vicinity of Germany and Russia, first of all Poland, where German interests coincided with the Russian ones, but also Czechoslovakia, Yugoslavia and Romania.

The main stake was Poland, more precisely the neutrality of the USSR towards the war which Hitler was planning to start against Poland, the Nazi leader being sure that England would not intervene and that France was not able to face Germany alone. Stalin's gain, apart from the economic one, was the strong impact on England and France, which had been temporizing for several months the negotiations with the USSR, thinking that postponing and prolonging them was the key to avoiding the war danger.

The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact was in fact a short-term armistice between the two bellicose powers of Europe: Nazi Germany and the Stalinist Soviet Union. Both acknowledged the fact that depending on how the conflict evolved in Central and Western Europe, there would come the time for a Nazi-Stalinist war. The pact was an intermezzo for each party to strengthen its forces, not a long term agreement.

The secret protocol, whose existence was discovered decades later, was a treaty based on the destruction of the European status-quo, the destruction of some states, beginning with the Polish one, and the territorial re-organization of the whole Europe, from center to east and west.

The news that this non-aggression pact was signed was a blow for Western, Central and South-Eastern Europe. 23 August 1939 has been considered by all democratic Europe "a black day" ever since the news of the pact got out and up to this day and world historiography has produced thousands of books, studies, articles, movies and TV shows dedicated to this act which did not respect any of the rules of international treaties.

The Romanian state was one of the "beneficiaries" of this unprecedented act in the history of international relations, a fact of which Romania became aware in June 1940. In the night between the 26<sup>th</sup> and the 27<sup>th</sup> of June 1940 the Soviet Ultimatum regarding Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina was issued, a territorial theft stipulated in the third article of the secret protocol, in which the USSR expressed its interest in Bessarabia and Germany its lack of interest, while Bucovina was however not mentioned.

Two months after Romania was forced to cede Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina to the USSR, an act which shocked the country and its inhabitants, the second theft happened – the cession of Northern Transylvania following a meeting of the Axis leaders in Vienna. The Soviet Ultimatum on 26/27 June 1940 and the Second Vienna Award on 30 August 1940 truncated the Romanian state territorially, as well as in terms of population. The alliances concluded by Romania between 1940 and 1944 and the evolution of the Romanian nation in the 20<sup>th</sup> century were profoundly marked by these territorial thefts.

At the beginning of the Communist period, references to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact disappeared. During the first decades of the Communist regime, museums had thematic exhibitions dedicated to the Union of Transylvania to Romania and its semi-centennial was celebrated in 1968, whereas the Union of Bessarabia and that of Bucovina with the Romanian Kingdom were only seldom mentioned verbally and never commemorated. At the beginning of the '70s vague references to Bessarabia started to appear in specialized magazines, but without making mention of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact or the Soviet Ultimatum in June 1940.

The National History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania was inaugurated in 1972, after a long series of attempts not put into practice. Before the war there existed a Museum of Antiquities and in 1955 a Resolution of the Council of Ministers decreed the founding of the Museum of National History of the Popular Republic of Romania. The idea was abandoned until 1967, when the State Committee for Culture showed in a report addressed to the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party that it was necessary to establish a National History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania, a complex structure with a qualified personnel able to present the entire history of Romania, from prehistory until the present, in accordance with the ideological line of the Communist Party (The Romanian National Archives – The Fund „The Central Committee of Romanian Communist Party - The Propaganda and Agitation Service”, File 43/1974, p. 8).

The museum – for which the state allotted the Postal Palace in Bucharest, a late 19<sup>th</sup> century historic building - was supposed to be inaugurated on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1971, when the Romanian Communist Party celebrated 50 years of existence, but because at that time its setting up had not been yet completed, the inauguration took place one year later. The National History Museum of the Socialist Republic of Romania was until December 1989 one of the means of propaganda employed by the Propaganda and Agitation Department of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party, but, at the same time, an institution which promoted the prehistory and history of the Romanians.

Inaugurated in an epoch of openness towards Western Europe and the USA, in the museum's activity the professionalism of employees who tried throughout decades and sometimes succeeded in organizing interesting exhibitions, based on historical and not only propagandistic analyses, was combined with the zeal of others aiming to impose the political line of the party.

“The departments of modern and contemporary history are going to be organized in tight collaboration with the Museum for the History of the Communist Party and of the Revolutionary and Democratic Movement in Romania” was the directive issued by the party in 1970.

The directors of the museum, as well as the entire personnel were obliged to study party documents, especially the speeches of the party's leader, Nicolae

Ceaușescu, and this obligation became one of the main activities of museum workers during the '80s, when the cult of personality had gained unimaginable proportions.

The impact of the "July Theses" on the development of the National History Museum was considerable, as the Romanian Communist Party and its leader, Nicolae Ceaușescu, were supposed to play an important role in all cultural activities. The most important museum of the country was supposed to reflect the actions of the party and its ruler.

In 1971 the Council of Socialist Culture and Education was founded, an organism coordinating the cultural activity of the entire country. Within this organism there existed the Direction of Museums, which coordinated, supervised, controlled and censored the activity of museums.

The permanent exhibition of the National History Museum of Romania comprised 50 halls displayed chronologically, from the Paleolithic until "Romania in the years of Socialist construction", a Numismatic Cabinet, a *Lapidarium* and the National Treasure. The permanent exhibition had a pronounced propagandistic character, with large parts of the country's modern and contemporary history missing, such as the time when Romania was a kingdom ruled by the Hohenzollern-Sigmaringen dynasty.

Starting with the year 1921, when the Romanian Communist Party was founded, this event was presented as having had a decisive role in the political and social life of Romania. Thus, a new history was erroneously fabricated, one serving the interests of the Communists. The direct involvement of the Romanian Communist leaders in the thematic of the National Museum was real, as proven by the discussions held in the Central Committee, whose transcriptions can nowadays be studied at the Romanian National Archives. For example, Nicolae Ceaușescu wanted the display in the museum of the "treaty between Tsar Peter I and Dimitrie Cantemir (1673-1723), in which the border of Moldova reaches the Dniester and through which Moldova is recognized as being a single country belonging to Dimitrie Cantemir and then Ștefan cel Mare (Stephen the Great) (sic 1433-1504)" (Romanian National Archives – The Fund „The Central Committee of Romanian Communist Party - The Propaganda and Agitation Service”, File 6/1970, pp. 2-3).

The leadership of the Communist Party discussed these issues, among which the problem of the Soviet Ultimatum of 1940 and of Romania's treasure sent to Russia during the First World War but never returned. Although the history of their own people was not unknown to Communist leaders, they mixed up epochs and wanted inexistent documents to be fabricated. N. Ceaușescu wanted the display of "Lenin's decree whereby he will restore to us our treasure once the working class takes over the power. And when will that happen in Romania? They must give us back 120 tons (sic 93.4 tons) of gold, not the skirts of who-knows-who" (Ilie 2013 205). Paul Niculescu-Mizil believed that the Soviet Ultimatum should be made public for the population and if the Soviet government did not agree, that was its own business, given that "the last articles of the ultimatum denature history and it does not suit

them to say that the Soviet state annexed a territory as war compensation; it is an act which contradicts the Leninist thesis regarding war and peace”. (Ilie 2013 205) Leonte Răutu proposed the display of maps from 1812, 1918 (with the Union of Bessarabia to Romania) and 1940 (with the territorial losses of that year) and “the quoting of Soviet declarations exactly as they appear in official Soviet documents”. (Ilie 2013 206)

Only two years after the opening of the museum, in 1974, the text of *The non-aggression treaty between Germany and the USSR* was published for the first time in Romania, in the book *International Relations in Acts and Documents (1919-1939)*. This was a sign indicating the Romanian government’s openness to the Western world and the intention to limit Soviet influences. The book had an important echo and a circulation to match, also entering the library of the National History Museum, but without its content having an impact on the museum’s thematic.

Also in 1974, Pantelimon Halippa (1883-1979), one of the Bessarabian politicians who achieved the Union of Bessarabia with Romania, who was incarcerated in Romanian Soviet prisons, was extradited to the USSR and survived through many years of prison, donated some of his personal objects to the National History Museum of Romania: photographs from 1918-1941, letters, a watch, a pen, all being related to his activity during the Union of Bessarabia and the interwar period and all of which became museum pieces. Some of the successors of Bessarabian political leaders with decisive roles in the Union of Bessarabia with Romania followed his example, wanting the memory of their parents not to be forgotten. For decades these objects were kept in storage rooms of the museum and only after the fall of Communism did they begin to be used in exhibitions dedicated to Bessarabia, the most important ones being those organized in 2012, with the occasion of the 100<sup>th</sup> commemoration since the Tsarist Empire annexed that part of Moldova which became known as Bessarabia, and in 2018, for the centennial of the “Union of Bessarabia with Romania” (Bessarabia 2012 30-31) and for centennial of the Union of Bessarabia, Transylvania and Bucovina with Romania, the latter exhibition, “Semper Uniti”, being currently on display at the National History Museum of Romania.

In 1977, after the great earthquake of March that year, the National History Museum, which was seriously damaged, was closed for a while. For its reopening the proportion between historical epochs and subjects was changed. In each section, there was an increase in the number of quotations from the leader of the Romanian Communist Party, who had opinions on all periods of Romanian history, opinions which were presented at large in the permanent exhibition. The politicization and ideologising of Romanian history augmented, as well as the making up of historical myths, from “the great King Burebista of the Dacians” to “the great ruler of the Romanian Communist Party”. (Ilie 2013 206-221)

While whole epochs were treated superficially or ignored, on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 1987 was inaugurated the exhibition “Tokens of love, high esteem and profound appreciation which comrade Nicolae Ceaușescu and comrade Elena Ceaușescu enjoy, of the ample amicable and collaboration relations between the Romanian people and the peoples of other countries”, which occupied 10 museum halls. The cult of personality took great proportions so that by 1989 the exhibition homaging the Ceaușescu couple comprised 10,000 objects. The Ceaușescu couple considered the National History Museum “our museum” and the importance of historical events paled in the face of the accomplishments of the “Carpathian genius” and the “world renowned savant”. (Ilie 2013 206-221)

In 1968 and 1978 official propaganda allowed the making of nuanced references to the Union of Bessarabia and what Romanians could read between the lines was an attack against the USSR for having forcefully annexed Bessarabia. However, an official position was only taken in January 1988, when “Scântea”, the official press organ of the Romanian Communist Party, published a speech of the “Carpathian genius” with direct references to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the way the great powers treated smaller states. The discourse was strictly propagandistic, of praise for the achievements of the “Golden Epoch” that Romania traversed under the rule of the great leader, and references to the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact were meant to justify the Romanian dictator’s rejection of the Soviet-inspired wave of reformation that had begun to gradually take hold of the states under Soviet influence.

Exacerbated nationalism, nationalist propaganda, the creation of a glorious past and of an ideal future that was owed to dictator Nicolae Ceaușescu were for years used by the propaganda and the repression apparatuses. The tactic of nationalism and chauvinism had been many times used by the Communist oppressive system to explain the low standard of living of the Romanian population: rumours were spread that Romania was in danger from the neighbouring states and the Western ones, once ties with the latter were cut off, but also from the Soviet Union, which wanted to reform the Communist system of Central and South-East European Communist states.

In the Soviet Union, the Glasnost had allowed debates on the non-aggression pact and made possible its publication, analyses varying from the claim that the Soviets had been unprepared and that Molotov had unexpectedly signed the act, without any previous negotiations (these ideas were expressed at a round table organized in Moscow on 31 March 1989 and published in the magazine “Voprosî Istoriei”, 6/1989), to asserting that the Soviets had negotiated in parallel with the Anglo-French and the Germans, but Hitler had declared ever since the autumn of 1938 that he would enter into an agreement with Stalin.

On the 25<sup>th</sup> of January 1989, in “Scântea”, the organ of the Romanian Communist Party, was made reference to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, a fact which shocked the Romanian society, as all written references to Bessarabia were prohibited, as well as any association between Nazism and Communism. This was either a sign

of Ceaușescu's regime openness or of another strategy devised by politruks in order to justify the hardships suffered by the population, the lack of food, heating and hot water, of decent living conditions.

The issue was eventually clarified in 1989.

During the meeting of the Executive Political Committee held on the 13<sup>th</sup> of November 1989 the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and the problem of the Romanian treasure sent to Russia in 1917 and never retrieved, another prohibited subject of the Communist era, were extensively debated. Following this high-level meeting, the Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the Romanian Communist Party decided, in November 1989, that the public had to be informed on the existence of the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact and its impact on the Romanian state. Thus, the December issue of the periodical "Magazin Istoric" (Mușat "Historical Magazine" 1989 25-32) published, between pages 25-32, an article entitled *The politics of force and dictates in the eve of the Second World War*, signed by Mircea Mușat, a leading exponent of the Communist-inspired historiography written during Ceaușescu's regime. Page 25 opened with a quote from Nicolae Ceaușescu directly alluding to the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact: "It should be recalled, in the current political context, that the Great Powers did not honour their assumed commitments and instead took the path of concession and compromise with Hitler's Germany. Moreover, the Ribbentrop-Molotov pact did not prevent any aggression and it could be said, without fear of being mistaken, that it actually had a negative role and facilitated the accomplishment of Hitlerist Germany's aggressive plans". Similar articles appeared in the publications "Lumea" ("The World", March 1989) and "Lupta întregului popor" ("The fight of the entire nation", November 1989).

Was a new era beginning in Romanian historiography? Was the regime opening to the prospect of revealing long-time hidden truths? Was something so serious happening internationally that the Romanian leader felt obliged to react by resorting to historical arguments and to show that the German-Soviet non-aggression pact on the 23<sup>rd</sup> of August 1939 destroyed the European balance and provoked the Second World War? In 1988, during a meeting between American president Ronald Reagan and Russian president Mihail Gorbaciov, the liberalization of South-Eastern European Communism was discussed and negotiated, Romania being one of the countries where the Communist regime of Ceaușescu had become anachronic. The Malta summit (2-3 December 1989) between American president George Bush and Mihail Gorbaciov, organized a few weeks after the fall of the Berlin Wall, put an end to the Cold War.

In December 1989, Ceaușescu's propaganda wanted to prove, using the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact as argument, the harm that the interference of the great powers caused to Romanian history, without realizing that the European wave of change could not be stopped at Romania's borders.

The Romanian Revolution of 1989 and the fall of the Communist regime in Romania did not only represent a change of political regime, but also one in the approach to history. The freedom of historians, researchers and museum curators to propose, plan and organize exhibitions became one of the freedoms gained in December 1989. Conferences were organized, tens of books were published, issues that had been taboo during the Communist regime began to be discussed. The Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact became the subject of tens of articles, studies, books and shows produced by Romanian historians.

“The National Museum”, the annual of the National History Museum of Romania, has published several analyses of this international act which marked the history of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In terms of exhibitions, the most recent examples of how the pact was reflected by the museum through exhibitions are the aforementioned ones organized in 2012 and 2018.

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