

# The Molotov-Ribbentrop Commission and Claims of Post-Soviet Secessionist Territories to Sovereignty

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**Abstract:** At the end of Soviet era, pressed by the Popular Front forces of the Baltic republics, the first Congress of the USSR People's Deputies decided to set up the Molotov-Ribbentrop Commission. The Baltic representatives of the commission debated on how to make null and void the secret protocol of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, which was considered as one of the main causes of incorporation of the Baltic States in 1940. The heated dispute inevitably extended to the issue of reevaluating national history, as well as the redeclaring of sovereignty and territorial restoration. This paper largely explores the diversion of three nationalizing republics concerning the negation of the secret protocol and territorial restorationism: Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova.

**Keywords:** Congress of USSR People's Deputies, Lithuania, Moldova, Molotov-Ribbentrop Commission, state sovereignty

The "Commission of the Congress of USSR People's Deputies for the Political and Legal Estimation of the Soviet-German Nonaggression Pact of 1939" (hereafter, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Commission, or MRC) was an important landmark in the collapse of the Soviet Union. The pact and the secret protocol attached to it, signed by Soviet foreign minister Vyacheslav Molotov and German foreign minister Joachim von Ribbentrop on August 23, 1939, drastically redrew the map of Eastern Europe. In 1939 and 1940, the Soviet Union incorporated the Baltic countries, Bessarabia, Karelia, and the eastern

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territories of Poland into its domain. The existence of the secret protocol was a long-established concern of Baltic intellectuals, although Soviet authorities repeatedly denied its very existence.

Perestroika changed the situation. On June 8, 1989, pressed by the Baltic republics, the first Congress of USSR People's Deputies decided to set up the MRC. As Table 1 shows, the MRC included a disproportionately large number of Baltic representatives, who earnestly debated against the MRC majority that continued to hold the traditional view of the

**TABLE 1. Members of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Commission**

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Position</b>
<b><u>Chairperson</u></b>	
Aleksandr Yakovlev	Secretary of the CPSU Central Committee
<b><u>Vice-chairs</u></b>	
Yuri Afanashev	Rector of the Moscow State Institute of Historical Archives
Valentin Falin	Head of the International Section of the CPSU Central Committee
<b><u>Members</u></b>	
Chingiz Aitomatov	President of the Writer's Union of the Kyrgyz SSR
Georgi Arbatov	Director of the Institute of USA and Canada of the USSR Academy of Science
Lyudmila Artyunyan	Head of department, Yerevan State University
Vasily Buikov	Belarusian writer and secretary of the USSR Writer's Union
Mavrik Bulifson	Senior teacher of the Latvian Art Academy
Igor Gryazin	Director of the Social and Philosophical Institute, the Estonian SSR
Ion Druthe	Moldovan writer
Grigore Eremei	Chairman of the Labor Union of the Moldovan SSR
Aleksei Kazannik	Assistant professor, Omsk State University
Ivars Kezbers	Secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party
Vitaly Korotich	Editor of the journal <i>Ogonek</i>
Vladimir Kravets	Foreign minister of the Ukrainian SSR
Sergei Lavrov	Head of department, Leningrad State University
Vytautas Landsbergis	Professor of the State Musicological Institute, the Lithuanian SSR
Merju Lauristin	Head of department, Tartu State University
Engeli Lippmaa	Director of the Institute of Biology Chemistry and Physics of the Estonian Academy of Science
Justin Martinkiaivicius	Lithuanian writer
Kazimieras Motieka	Lithuanian lawyer
Nikolai Neiland	Vice foreign minister of the Latvian SSR
Metropolitan Alexy (Ridiger)	Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod
Edgar Savisaar	Vice director of the Constructing Section of the Estonian Ministry of Light Industry
Vladimir Shinkaruk	Director of the Institute of Philosophy, the Ukrainian Academy of Sciences
Zita Šiličaitė	Lithuanian lawyer

fact's exploitation of "contradictions between imperialisms to earn time." On December 24, 1989, having listened to the report submitted by the MRC, the second Congress of USSR People's Deputies declared the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the secret protocol null and void since the time of their signature. This decision facilitated the overwhelming victory of the national democrats of the Baltic republics in the republican Soviet elections held in February-March 1990.

Looking at the MRC retrospectively, one would be surprised at the caliber of its members: Aleksandr Yakovlev (chairman), Yuri Afanas'ev, Georgi Arbatov, and Chingiz Aitomatov as star ideologues of Perestroika; Baltic nationalists or grave diggers of the Soviet Union, such as Vytautas Landsbergis, the future chairman of the Lithuanian parliament Seimas and Edgar Savisaar, the future Estonian prime minister; and Metropolitan Alexy II (Alexy Ridiger), the future patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church.

What is less known is the role played by the MRC during the beginning of the post-Soviet era in the emergence of secessionist territories that strove to gain international recognition as independent states in their own right. The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the secret protocol were the legal foundation of Soviet Moldova, which integrated the left and right banks of the Nistru River. During the interwar period, the former Tiraspol Uezd of Kherson Gubernia (in the Russian Empire) had its own autonomy, the Moldovan ASS, as part of Soviet Ukraine; the right bank, Bessarabia, belonged to Romania from 1918 to 1940. On June 23, 1990, the Moldovan Supreme Soviet confirmed the conclusion of the MRC and declared Moldova's sovereignty, identifying the territorial transfer of Romanian Bessarabia to the Soviet Union as illegal from the beginning. Responding to this, the left bank, Transnistria, organized numerous local referendums and town meetings during the summer of 1990 and declared the foundation of the Pridnestr Moldovan Republic on September 2, 1990.

This idea of restoring sovereignty to territories incorporated into the union republics of the USSR, confirmed by the second Congress of People's Deputies, was transferred to other more eastern territories of the union republics of the former USSR that were never subjected to the provisions of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. Georgia and Azerbaijan began to identify themselves as successor states of the democratic republics, which existed for a short period after the Russian Revolution. This restorationism made relations between secessionist territories (Transnistria, Abkhazia, South Ossetia, and Nagorno-Karabakh) and their mother union republics (Moldova, Georgia, and Azerbaijan) barely reconcilable. In 1989, the ethnic Polish districts of Lithuania, Gagauz, and South Ossetia only requested to have autonomous status to resist the language laws adopted by their mother union republics, but in 1990, the restorationism that the mother republics adopted as an official ideology of state building caused these territories to pursue the status of union republic. The secessionist territories argued that the union republics to which they belonged had abolished the legal foundations of their own statehood adopted during the Soviet period, with the result that their sovereignty over the secessionist territories ceased to be effective. To put it differently, the secessionists argued that it was not they but the mother republics that made their secession (from the mother republic, but not from the Soviet Union) inevitable.

According to the ideologues of Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia, the Azerbaijan Democratic Republic (1918-20) and the Democratic Republic of Georgia (1918-21) were not recognized internationally and did not have definite borders; during their existence, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia were in a state of civil war or under illegal occupation. They were forcibly incorporated into Soviet Azerbaijan and

Georgia by the treaties imposed by Moscow. Once Baku and Tbilisi declared these treaties ineffective from the time of their signature, Nagorno-Karabakh, South Ossetia, and Abkhazia automatically became independent.<sup>1</sup>

This paper does not try to establish whether the secessionists' arguments had respectable reasons or whether they just used their opponents' restorationism for justification. Rather, this paper exploits the archival documents of the MRC, preserved at the State Archive of the Russian Federation (f. 9654), to explain the diversion of three nationalizing republics: Lithuania, Ukraine, and Moldova. My conclusion is that restorationism did not always provide secessionists with convenient fuel, as the case of the Lithuanian Poles shows. Moldova's split into two states should be explained by the indecisiveness of the Moldovan political and intellectual elite at that time, rather than by the restorationism that the Moldovan Popular Front was pursuing.

### **An Overview of the Debate in the MRC**

The first mass demonstration in the Baltic republics took place on August 23, 1988, commemorating the forty-ninth anniversary ("the day of mourning") of the signature of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. According to an official statement from Sajudis (the Reform Movement of Lithuania), there were 250,000 participants in Vilnius and 50,000 in Kaunas.<sup>2</sup> In April 1989, on the eve of the first Congress of USSR People's Deputies, Vanda Kasauskiene, representative of the Institute of History attached to the Central Committee of the Lithuanian Communist Party, visited the CPSU Central Committee in Moscow to convey the Baltic people's request to re-examine of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol.<sup>3</sup> Under these circumstances, the first Congress of USSR People's Deputies (May 25-June 9, 1989) organized the MRC with twenty-six deputies under the chairmanship of Aleksandr Yakovlev, whom the Baltic public regarded as a "reformer."<sup>4</sup> It remains unclear by what criteria the Congress selected MRC members, but Lithuanian conservative Vytautas Landsbergis reminisces: "When we realized this action [the election of MRC members] would take place, we insisted that representatives from all Baltic republics should be included. Many deputies were hostile to this proposal, but Gorbachev surprised us by accepting our demand."<sup>5</sup> In other words, the People's Congress could have elected whomever it liked, if Landsbergis and other Baltic representatives had not become aware of the scenario beforehand.

The MRC held five plenary sessions at the Kremlin (June 8, July 5, 12, and 19, and November 4, 1989). At the first plenary session, Savisaar and Landsbergis demanded that the conclusion of the MRC be published by August 23, 1989, namely the fiftieth anniversary of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>6</sup> Landsbergis emphasized that 250,000 Lithuanian citizens rallied on the forty-ninth anniversary on August 23, 1988 and warned that secrecy might have a "harmful influence" on Baltic society.<sup>7</sup> Mavrik Bulifson from the Latvian Art Academy echoed Landsbergis by arguing that if the MRC failed to publish the investigation results by August 23, 1989, some other groups would organize independent investigation teams.<sup>8</sup> Zita Šilicite, a Lithuanian lawyer, regretted that Yakovlev did not change his opinion to keep the investigation results unpublished until the second Congress of People's Deputies was scheduled in autumn 1989, fearing that it would strengthen secessionism in the Baltic republics. Šilicite remarked that Gorbachev also feared that the secessionist movement would be strengthened by excessive openness.<sup>9</sup> In the end, the MRC failed to come to a conclusion in order for the report to be published by August 23, 1989.

Secession from the Soviet Union had become a main issue at the second MRC plenary session. In his opening speech, Georgi Arbatov warned the audience that he would boycott further MRC sessions if the Baltic members continued to combine reevaluation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact with the issue of secession of the Baltic republics and Bessarabia from the Soviet Union.<sup>10</sup> Savisaar, who was temporarily chairing the meeting instead of Yakovlev, also requested that the members not refer to secession,<sup>11</sup> but Lithuanian members continued to argue that the Baltic countries had preserved the *de jure* independence that they had had before the secret protocol and annexation by Stalin.<sup>12</sup> The second plenary session also examined the territorial issue. Estonian members tried to internationalize the issue of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and tried to attract the attention of, for example, Finnish and German intellectuals. However, if the Estonians had succeeded in involving Finland, the Finns would inevitably have requested that the MRC examine the Karelian problem. This alarmed the Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian members, who thought that the Karelian issue would inevitably turn into a debate around the lost territories of Poland—the largest victim of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>13</sup>

At the third plenary session, Šilicite insisted that popular meetings were criticizing the Lithuanian MRC representatives for inactivity.<sup>14</sup> Ivars Kezbers, secretary of the Central Committee of the Latvian Communist Party, said that the Baltic public regarded the MRC's activities as fruitless and that they might enter a critical stage if the MRC failed to publish at least partial results of the investigation by August 23, 1989.<sup>15</sup> Sergei Lavrov, Russian historian from Leningrad State University, sympathized with his Baltic colleague's concerns.<sup>16</sup> Some members raised the issue of secession again. Kazimieras Motieka, a Lithuanian lawyer, insisted that Lithuania would never have joined the Soviet Union without the secret protocol. Yakovlev repeatedly requested that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact not be linked to the issue of the current political status of union republics, but Igor Griazin, an Estonian lawyer, even argued that the Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic was legally and politically null despite its *de facto* existence.<sup>17</sup> At the end of the discussion, Chingiz Aitomatov, a Kyrgyz writer, tried to reconcile Yakovlev with the Baltic members. Savisaar supported Aitomatov, proposing again that the secession issue not be raised. However, the Baltic members continued to expect that official recognition of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol as null and void from the beginning would facilitate the Baltic republics' independence.

During the fourth plenary session, the MRC's political configuration unexpectedly changed; Moldovan and Ukrainian members, who attended the MRC session for the first time, supported the Soviet authorities' position against their Baltic colleagues. Thus, the political configuration within the MRC switched from "Yakovlev versus the Baltic members" to "supporters of the status quo versus the Baltic members." At the beginning of the plenary session, Estonian representative Igor Griazin repeated the idea of the retrospective invalidity of the secret protocol, but Vladimir Kravets, foreign minister of the Ukrainian SSR, insisted that nothing be examined but the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, in accordance with the MRC's official title, evading reference to the secret protocol.<sup>18</sup> Kravets repeated the traditional Soviet propaganda view that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact was a great achievement of Soviet diplomacy because it prolonged peace for at least two years.<sup>19</sup> After Kravets, Sergei Afromeev, a Soviet Army colonel introduced by Yakovlev as Moldovan guest speaker and a "specialist"<sup>20</sup> on the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, argued that the MRC should not see the issue solely from the vantage point of the Baltic republics and Bessarabia, but should put it in the world context; hence, it would become clear that the pact prolonged peace for two years and defended the Baltic nations against Hitler's invasion.<sup>21</sup> Against this "specialist," Lithuanian representative Kazimieras Motieka and

Estonian MRC member Endeli Lippmaa argued that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol were an international crime driven by Soviet expansionist motives.<sup>22</sup> Yakovlev raised his voice in anger to ask to cease discussing secession and to return to the original purpose of the MRC of reevaluating the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.<sup>23</sup>

Over two months between the fourth and fifth plenary sessions of the MRC, the Baltic democratizing movements reached their apogee. On August 18, 1989, Yakovlev published his personal opinion in the newspaper *Pravda* that the current political status of Lithuania, Latvia, and Estonia was not a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol, but of “other” international circumstances.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, this statement caused furious protests in the Baltic republics. On August 22, a commission of the Lithuanian Supreme Soviet, rejecting Yakovlev’s opinion, concluded that the secret protocol had been null and void from the moment of its signing; accordingly, the annexation of Lithuania to the Soviet Union was regarded as invalid.<sup>25</sup> On August 23, 1989 two million Baltic people rallied to protest against the secret protocol and formed a “human chain” stretching for six hundred kilometers from Tallinn via Riga to Vilnius.<sup>26</sup>

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This unprecedented social upheaval conditioned the conclusion of the MRC. A Ukrainian representative, Vladimir Kravets, repeated his opinion that the MRC’s discussion should be limited to evaluating the Pact.<sup>27</sup> Confrontation between the Baltic members and “supporters of the status quo” continued.<sup>28</sup> Eventually, however, twenty-one members of the MRC supported the Baltic proposal, which confirmed the existence of the secret protocol, declared it null and void from the moment of its signing, and denounced the infringement of sovereignty of interwar Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania. Remarkably, this conclusion made no reference to Moldova.<sup>29</sup>

The MRC was torn by pressures from various positions. There was a long interval between the first and second sessions, as well as between the fourth and fifth. During these intervals, mass meetings and demonstrations in the Baltic republics made the MRC dysfunctional. This public awakening in the Baltic republics profoundly influenced the opinion of the MRC’s Baltic members. Meanwhile, Gorbachev abided by a don’t-rock-the-boat principle and did not hurry to publish the investigation results.<sup>30</sup> The Polish government was understandably interested in the MRC’s activities, but Lithuanian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian members of the MRC did their best to prevent Poland’s involvement. On August 22, 1989, the Polish government declared that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol “violated universally approved principles of international law.”<sup>31</sup>

### **Differing Positions of Union Republics on the Secret Protocol**

One may observe trade-off relations between sovereignty and territory in the reevaluation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and protocol, because there was only one absolute loser—namely, Poland, which lost both independence and territories. Lithuania lost independence but gained Vilnius from Poland. Therefore, Lithuanian MRC members requested

that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and protocol be made retrospectively null and void to achieve independence, but carefully distracted the attention of other members from territorial issues. This was not only a historical problem, but also an actual one, because the majority of the Vilnius district population continued to comprise ethnic Poles. Similarly, Ukrainian and Belarusian MRC members were reluctant from the beginning to declare the secret protocol null and void, because the protocol caused Ukraine and Belarus to unify their western borderlands (for Ukraine, Galicia, Bukovina, and Transcarpathia).

### **Lithuania's Position**

On August 30, 1989, Sajudis launched a campaign to demand that the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact be published and collected 1.5 million signatures (86 percent of the ethnic Lithuanian and 57 percent of the non-Lithuanian population of the republic signed).<sup>32</sup> The Lithuanian Freedom League sent out its questionnaire asking, "Do you want to live under independent Lithuania?" and 1.2 million Lithuanians answered positively.<sup>33</sup> Sajudis made clear that sovereignty was synonymous with independence.<sup>34</sup> On October 22, 1988, a Sajudis meeting chaired by Justinas Marcinkevicius, Landsberis' father, boldly stated: "We are here to restore Lithuania's independence."<sup>35</sup> Landsbergis and Marcinkevicius thought that the easiest and most legitimate way to achieve this purpose was to prove the legal invalidity of the secret protocol. Instead, Sajudis highlighted two treaties concluded between Lithuania and Soviet Russia: the Soviet Russian-Lithuanian Peace Treaty, signed on July 12, 1920, and the Soviet-Lithuanian Nonaggression Treaty signed on September 28, 1926. Both treaties included mutual recognition of sovereignty, independence, territorial integrity, and the principle of nonintervention.<sup>36</sup> Motieka stressed this point at the MRC sessions.<sup>37</sup> Another reason for Lithuanians' reference to the 1920 Peace Treaty was that the Soviet Union had accordingly satisfied most of Lithuania's territorial demands, recognizing Lithuanian sovereignty over a relatively large territory including areas in Vilnius, Grodno, Suwalki, Lida, and Augustow.<sup>38</sup> Historically, however, the "bilateral" solution to the territorial issue without the participation of Poland provoked the concerns of interwar France and the United Kingdom, both patrons of Poland. This history made "democratic" Lithuania in the late 1980s hesitant to emphasize the significance of the 1920 Peace Treaty.

The stumbling block for Lithuanian MRC members was the territorial status of Vilnius. The Lithuanian government, along with many intellectuals, had no doubt that Vilnius had, from ancient times, belonged to Lithuania; they maintained that Lithuania "recovered" Vilnius in 1940.<sup>39</sup> However, Lithuanian intellectuals thought that Lithuania recovered Vilnius at the expense of its own independence (exactly as prescribed by the secret protocol),<sup>40</sup> while Anatol Lieven, a specialist on Baltic history, remarked that if Lithuania canceled the secret protocol, it would be obliged to return Vilnius to Poland.<sup>41</sup> This situation put the Lithuanian MRC members in a contradictory situation; they boldly requested restoration of independence while handling the territorial issue quite gingerly.<sup>42</sup>

The Lithuanians' concern was not groundless. The local councils (Soviets) of the ethnic Polish districts of Šalčininkai and Vilnius opposed the Lithuanian leaders in their attempt to secede from the Soviet Union on the pretext of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the secret protocol. The Šalčininkai and Vilnius district soviets legitimately argued that their territories did not belong to interwar Lithuania before the pact/protocol and should therefore secede from Lithuania, if Lithuania determined the pact/protocol to be invalid from the beginning. In hindsight, the majority of the Lithuanian Poles did not necessarily share

this argument proposed by the politicized local soviets, but the Lithuanian government and MRC members were so concerned the fear of Polish irredentism that they overestimated the influence of the local Polish movement.<sup>43</sup>

### **Position of Latvia and Estonia**

The Latvian and Estonian public, similar to the Lithuanians, were seriously concerned about the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol. For example, the Estonian Popular Front collected about 435,000 signatures requesting reexamination of the secret protocol.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, Estonian MRC members negotiated with Moscow to gain recognition of the invalidity of the secret protocol, while the Latvian members, similar to their Lithuanian colleagues, tried to appeal to the public for recognition of its invalidity. In July 1989, when neither the second nor the third MRC sessions could reach any conclusion, Ivars Kezbers, secretary for ideology of the Latvian Communist Party, delivered a speech at the Latvian Supreme Soviet noting that the secret protocol violated international law, divided spheres of influence between Germany and the Soviet Union, ignored the sovereignty of the Baltic republics, and annexed them to the Soviet state.<sup>45</sup> His statement intensified the Latvian movement for independence. On the eve of the fifth MRC session, Kezbers at the Latvian Supreme Soviet repeatedly criticized the secret protocol and its ensuing events in 1939-1940 as constituting an international crime against the Latvian nation.<sup>46</sup> Similar to their Lithuanian colleagues, the Latvian and Estonian MRC members referred to the peace treaties between Soviet Russia and Latvia / Estonia in the 1920s.<sup>47</sup>

Both republics were troubled by the problem of a Russian minority, in parallel to Lithuanian concern about the historical territorial problem with Poland. At the first Congress of USSR People's Deputies, which discussed the secret protocol for the first time, the Russian minority in Estonia criticized the Estonian government for attempting to violate minority rights by imposing the Estonian language as the official language for the whole population.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the Russian minority in Estonia was trying to create an ethnically Russian Narva-Sirramae autonomous district. The Estonian government feared heaping fuel on the fire by arguing for the invalidity of the secret protocol to secede from the Soviet Union. Therefore, the Estonian MRC members sought to turn the issue of the validity of the secret protocol from a political issue into academic-historical dispute. Savisaar emphasized that his argument against the validity of the secret protocol did not aim to create an anti-Russian mood at all, adding, however, that 88 percent of the Estonians and even 41 percent of the non-Estonians of the republic admitted that the secret protocol was an international crime committed under Stalinism.<sup>49</sup>

### **Moldova's Position**

Moldovan MRC members did not act in concert with their Baltic colleagues despite Moldova, in a sense, also being a "victim" of the secret protocol. Motieka recalls that Sajudis could not unify with the Moldovan Popular Front because the Moldovan MRC members were not determined in their position regarding the secret protocol and persuade their own scheme of nation-building.<sup>50</sup> On the other hand, a Moldovan MRC member, Grigore Eremei, who was a representative of the Moldovan Worker's Union, recalls that they did not feel sympathy toward the Baltic members who only insisted on discussing their own topic, indifferent to the plight of others.<sup>51</sup>

The Moldovan public was less interested in the secret protocol than their Baltic counterparts simply because of a lack of information. In 1989, only a few articles appeared

concerning the secret protocol, even in the pages of *Literatura si Arta*, practically an organ of the Moldovan Popular Front.<sup>52</sup> At the meetings, however, activists of the Moldovan Popular Front, imitating their Baltic counterparts, argued for the invalidity of the secret protocol. In July 1989, the Moldovan Popular Front claimed that some parts of the current Ukrainian SSR's territories—such as Akkerman, Kiliya, Izmail, Hotin, and Northern Bukovina—had originally been Moldovan (Romanian) domains, but the Molotov-Ribbentrop secret protocol illegally transferred them to the Ukrainian SSR; they stated that Moldova (Romania) should “recover” these territories.<sup>53</sup> It is true that several Moldovan Popular Front members—and, simultaneously, the USSR's deputies from Moldova,

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such as Leonida Lari, Nicolae Davija, and Mihai Cimpoi—demanded that the secret protocol be retrospectively declared null and void. However, the first USSR People's Congress did not select them as MRC members, but instead chose Grigore Eremei, Ion Druthe, and Sergei Afromeef; all were pro-Moscow figures. Concerning the MRC, Eremei recalls in his autobiography that he could not give any comment at MRC sessions, while Druthe could research neither the secret protocol nor the historical Bessarabian issue from

the Moldovan point of view.<sup>54</sup> In fact, a stenograph of the MRC reveals that Eremei could not follow the discussion led by the Baltic members; he even admitted that every topic was too unfamiliar for him to judge it “right or wrong.”<sup>55</sup> His greatest concern was not the validity of the secret protocol, but the Bessarabian problem in 1939 and 1940.<sup>56</sup>

Eremei's indecisiveness reflected a wider reaction. Valentin Aleksandrov, a Russian secretary of the MRC, argued that, unlike the Baltic case, Moldova did not have any legal grounds for sovereignty, since the Soviet government never recognized the annexation of Bessarabia by the Romanian Kingdom and therefore did not conclude any treaty with Romania in regard to Bessarabia.<sup>57</sup> Moldova would not gain independence (which it had never had), but would revert to being a district of Romania, if the invalidity of the secret protocol was recognized. It was unlikely, however, that Moldova's “nomenclature,” which benefited under Soviet rule, would pursue the position of provincial petty politicians or officials of Romania. Aleksandrov predicted that the retrospective cancellation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop secret protocol would cause two territorial problems: Northern Bukovina and the South Black Sea region, annexed to Ukraine; and Transnistria, gained from Ukraine.

The more active the Moldovan Popular Front became in 1990, the more earnestly Transnistrian politicians and workers pursued secession from Moldova. Transnistria composed the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic within the Ukrainian SSR before 1940. Transnistrian politicians and intellectuals insisted that Transnistria had never belonged to Moldova or Romania until 1940, and lost autonomy because of the secret protocol.<sup>58</sup> The Moldovan public did not have a clear notion about whether Moldova should be independent or integrated into Romania. Under these conditions, the Moldovan MRC

members, in contrast to their Baltic colleagues, were unable to adopt any definite position in regard to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol.

### **Position of Ukraine and Belarus**

The Belarusian SSR had only one representative in the MRC, Vasily Buikov, who delivered several speeches to the MRC sessions. Meanwhile, the Belarusian Supreme Soviet claimed the Belarusian SSR's territorial rights over the Vilnius district in March 1990, when Lithuania declared the restoration of its independence.<sup>59</sup> Remarkably, this dispute around Vilnius raised territorial awareness among Belarusian intellectuals and politicians.

Indisputably, Ukraine recovered its "ethnic territories" by virtue of the secret protocol. Soviet authority maintained that Ukraine's liberation and unification was completed when the Soviet Union obtained eastern Galicia as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact in 1939 and when Czechoslovakian president Eduard Beneš surrendered Ruthenia (Transcarpathia) to the Soviet Union in 1945.<sup>60</sup> Vladimir Kravets, a Ukrainian member of the MRC, also argued that Ukraine recovered its territories as a result of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and the "subsequent process" (he did not refer to the secret protocol).<sup>61</sup>

An article that appeared in *Pravda of Ukraine* on August 15, 1989, shared Kravets' opinion.<sup>62</sup> Aleksandr Yakovlev remarked that the Ukrainian citizens would oppose violation of the Ukrainian SSR's territorial integrity by declaring the invalidity of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and its secret protocol,<sup>63</sup> though it was questionable whether ordinary Ukrainians were aware of this history.

### **Conclusion**

As we have examined, the Moldovan elite was deeply split between ambiguous and indecisive MRC representatives and public activists targeting restorationism (in the Bessarabian context, unionism with Romania). This ambiguity or absence of unified, coordinated opinion among the elite provided Transnistrian secessionists with inexhaustible political fuel; they could demonstrate, in the eyes of the left-bank population, the unionists' activities on the right bank as proof of the real danger of the incorporation of Moldova into Romania. On the other hand, the Transnistrian secessionists did not face any serious ideological challenge from the indecisive right-bank leaders, who lacked a consistent view on pan-Romanianism, the secret protocol, and the Bessarabian problem.

In contrast, the Ukrainian and Lithuanian elites had a decisive position. The Ukrainian party-state leaders, intellectuals, and journalists were unanimous in their appreciation of the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact (and tacitly, of the secret protocol) as the legal foundation whereby Ukraine could achieve historical reunification. Therefore, there was no crisis of state legitimacy that could be exploited by secessionists, such as the Crimean leaders.

The Lithuanian elite consciously adopted contradictory tactics; they requested that the secret protocol be made retrospectively null and void to achieve independence without surrendering the territories gained by virtue of the protocol. These tactics could be effective since Poland abstained from active intervention in the reevaluation process, perhaps implying that Poland's territorial claims could benefit conservative forces in the Soviet Union. Moreover, the Belarusian SSR's claim over Vilnius could never be serious enough to affect Lithuania's political situation.

At the second Congress of USSR People's Deputies, the proposal to publish the decision based on the MRC's report gained 1,052 yeas, 678 nays, and 150 abstentions. Subsequently, Aleksandr Yakovlev, who had consistently resisted the inclusion of the secret protocol into

the MRC's agenda, took the stage and said that there was a historical truth that could not be ignored. After this statement, the second vote got 1,432 yeas, 252 nays, and 264 abstentions.<sup>64</sup> On December 24, 1989, the second Congress, under Chairman Mikhail Gorbachev declared the secret protocol null and void at the moment of its signing.<sup>65</sup> This could not change the course of events in the Baltic republics, but it instead provided an exceptional precedent demonstrating that the legal foundations of a state can be abolished not only retrospectively, but also selectively.

## NOTES

1. For example, see the resolution adopted by the South Ossetian Soviet on September 20, 1990: Moskovskii gosudarstvennyi institut mezhdunarodnykh otnoshenii, *Konflikty v Abkhazii i Yuzhnoi Osetii: Dokumenty 1989-2006 gg.* (Moscow: Panorama, 2008), pp. 185-186). As an argument of a later period, see Shahen Avakian, "Nagorno-Karabakh: Legal Aspects" (2005), pp. 11-12.

2. *Lithuanian Way 1* (Vilnius: Lithuanian Reform Movement "Sajudis," 1990), pp. 25-26.

3. Sovetskaya Estoniya, April 22, 1989.

4. See the statement by Antanas Burucas in *Atgimimas*, September 16, 1988. Opening the first MRC plenary session, however, Yakovlev identified the role of the MRC of examining the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact and "other related documents," but did not mention the secret protocol. "Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii" [GARF], f. 9654, op. 2, d. 11., 23 and 28.

5. Vytautas Landsbergis, *Lithuania: Independent Again* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000), p. 147.

6. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 123, l. 37.

7. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 123, l. 37.

8. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 123, l. 38, 42.

9. *Atgimimas*. August 18-25, 1989.

10. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 124, ll. 199 and 201.

11. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 124, l. 200.

12. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 124, l. 201.

13. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 124, l. 209.

14. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 17.

15. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 18.

16. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 125.

17. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 28.

18. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 92. Landsbergis reminisced later that the Baltic members were conscious that reference to the MRC's formal title was already pointless at that stage, but did not argue against Kravets (Landsbergis, op. cit., p. 148.).

19. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, ll. 93 - 94.

20. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 105.

21. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, ll. 105-110.

22. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, ll. 110-113.

23. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 113.

24. *Pravda*, August 18, 1989

25. Walter C. Clemens, Jr., *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), pp. 125-126.

26. *Ibid.*, pp. 124-125.

27. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 127, l. 159.

28. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 127, l. 190 - 191.

29. Lietuvos valstybės naujasis archyvas [LVNA], D. 32 [Motiekos Fondas], Ap. 1, B. 81.

30. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 127, l. 132; Clemens, *Baltic Independence*, 125.

31. Clemens, *Baltic Independence and Russian Empire*, 126.

32. *Sovetskaya Litva*, September 27, 1989.

33. *Dzvanas*, August 1989, Nr. 1.

34. *Ibid.*, 132.
35. Landsbergis, *Lithuania: Independent Again*, 122.
36. Al'fansas Eidinmas and Rudis Gyadiminas, *Novyi vzglyad na istoriyu Litvy* (Kaunas, 1991), 110; Georgii Efremov, *My lyudi drug drugu—Litva: Budni svobody 1988-1989* (Moscow, 1990), 84.
37. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 25.
38. Vytautas Žalys, "The Return of Lithuania to the European Stage," in Alfonsas Eidintas and Vytautas Žalys eds., *Lithuania in European Politics: The Years of the First Republic 1918-1940* (Vilnius: Vaga, 1998), 69-70.
39. Romuald J. Misiunas and Reippn Taagepera, *The Baltic States: Years of Dependence 1940-1980* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 16; Jonas P. Kedys, *Terorizuojama ir Naikinama Lietuva 1938-1991* (Klaipėda: Ryto, 1994), 42.
40. Alfred Erich Senn, *Gorbachev's Failure in Lithuania* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 32; Anatol Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution: Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania and the Path to Independence* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 79; Žalys, "The Return of Lithuania," 69-70.
41. Lieven, *The Baltic Revolution*, 167.
42. Žalys, "The Return of Lithuania," 59-61. The MRC was also formed at the Lithuanian republican level, which behaved, understandably, more optimistically. On August 18, 1989, the Lithuanian MRC concluded that the secret protocol was null and void since the time of its signing (LVNA, D. 32, Ap. 1, B. 81) and that Germany and the Soviet Union violated international law because they prevented the main parties, Lithuania and Poland, from partaking in the negotiation for territorial division of Vilnius and Klaipėda (*Sovetskaya Estoniya*, August 23, 1989).
43. I have discussed this problem in Japanese: see my "Soren makki niokeru minzoku mondai no matoryoshuka kouzou: Ritoania Porando-jin mondai no keisu sutadei [An Analysis of the 'Matreshka' Structure of Ethnic Problems in the Waning Months of the Soviet Union: A Case Study of the Lithuanian Poles]," *Suravu kenkyu [Slavic Studies]* 54, 2007, 101-130.
44. *Sovetskaya Estoniya*, October 11, 1989.
45. *Sovetskaya Latvija*, July 30, 1989.
46. *Sovetskaya Latvija*, November 15, 1989.
47. Vizulis, *The Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact*, 100.
48. LVNA, F. 43, Ap. 1, B. 63.
49. *Sovetskaya Estoniya*, July 28, 1989.
50. My interview with Kazimieras Motieka, the vice president of Lithuania (1990-1992), Vilnius, June 10, 2006.
51. Grigore Eremei, *Nevidimoe litso vlasti* (Chişinău: Litera, 2005), 371.
52. *Literatura și Artă*. August 10, 1989; November 9, 1989.
53. LVNA, F. 32, Ap. 1, B. 101.
54. Eremei, *Nevidimoe*, 371.
55. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 114.
56. Eremei, *Nevidimoe*, 356.
57. *Sovetskaya Moldova*, June 8, 1991; July 2, 1991.
58. Irina Blagodatskikh, "Moldova i Pridnestrov'e v poiskakh 'svoei' istorii," in K. Aimermakher and G. Bordyugov, eds., *Natsional'nye istorii v sovetskom i postsovetskikh gosudarstvakh* (Moscow: Aito-XX, 1999), 205.
59. Hélène C. d'Encausse maintains that Moscow framed this plot against Landsbergis because the Belarusians had never requested it before this resolution. Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, *La Gloire des Nations ou la Fin de l'Empire Soviétique* (Paris: Fayard, 1990), pp. 281-283.
60. Hugh Seton-Watson, "Russian Nationalism in Historical Perspective," in Robert Conquest, ed., *The Last Empire: Nationality and the Soviet Future* (Stanford: Hoover Institution Press, 1986), 17.
61. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 94.
62. *Pravda Ukrainy*, August 15, 1989.
63. GARF, f. 9654, op. 2, d. 126, l. 138.
64. Eremei, *Nevidimoe litso vlasti*, 361, 363.
65. *Sovetskaya Litva*, December 28, 1989.