

'A NEW GREATER ROMANIA'? ROMANIAN CLAIMS TO THE SERBIAN BANAT IN 1941¹

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Introduction

On the morning of April 6 1941 the Germans launched a *Blitzkrieg* attack on the kingdom of Yugoslavia. Within a week Belgrade had surrendered and the dismemberment of Yugoslavia began. Amongst the spoils of war was the Serbian (or Yugoslav) Banat. This was the western portion of the Banat (historically known as the Banat of Temesvár), relinquished by Hungary under the terms of the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. The Serbian Banat quickly became the object of rival territorial claims by the Reich's Romanian and Hungarian allies. This article will argue that the Romanian government lay claim to the region, encouraged by growing nationalist sentiment both within Romania and in the Serbian Banat itself. It will further be argued that, whereas in the past the Romanian government had justified the possession of Romanian territory with reference to the Paris peace treaties and international law, the claim to the Serbian Banat represented the beginning of a policy which sought to justify the expansion of Romania on the basis of the ethnic principle. After all, the Serbian Banat had never been part of the Romanian state or of the Romanian principalities. Romanian foreign-policy makers were no longer concerned merely with protecting the country's territorial integrity or with attempts to regain the territories lost in 1940 to the Soviet Union, Hungary and Bulgaria. The concept of a Romania based on the legality of the Paris peace treaties, as conceived of by Romanian foreign-policy makers in the 1920s and 1930s, was thus jettisoned in favour of ethnic expansionism.

While historians have paid considerable attention to the Romanian-Hungarian dispute over Transylvania in 1940, relatively little attention has been paid to Romania and Hungary's competing claims to the Serbian Banat in the spring of 1941 or to the ensuing crisis.² Where

¹ The Romanian government's memorandum of April 23 1941 officially claiming the Serbian Banat has been described as a scheme for 'a new Greater Romania' by Jiġa Rotaru, Vladimir Zodian and Octavian Burcin in *Mareşalul Ion Antonescu. Am făcut 'Războiul Sfânt împotriva bolşevismului'*. *Campania anului 1941*, Oradea, 1994, p. 58.

² Since in the archival documents the disputed area is most frequently referred to as the Serbian, rather than Yugoslav, Banat, the region will be described as the Serbian Banat in this article. It is sometimes also known in the secondary literature as the West Banat. Hillgruber, in his otherwise detailed study of General Antonescu's foreign policy, devotes only two pages to the crisis over the Serbian Banat. See Andreas Hillgruber, *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu. Die deutsch-rumänischen Beziehungen 1938-1944*,

historians have discussed the question, the Romanian government's claims to the Serbian Banat have not been fully elaborated, while some have even asserted that the Third Reich attempted to force the region on a reluctant Romania.³ This article will argue that far from offering the Serbian Banat to Romania, Adolf Hitler and the German foreign ministry had originally foreseen the re-incorporation of the Serbian Banat into Hungary. Such was the intensity of Romanian-Hungarian animosity over the disposal of the Serbian Banat, however, that the Germans genuinely feared armed conflict would break out between the two countries and imperil their plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union. The Reich was thus forced to change its policy and place the region under direct German military administration.

The Background: The Paris Peace Conference and Romanian Inter-war Foreign Policy

Lloyd George is said to have exclaimed, 'where the hell is the Banat?', when the region came up for discussion during the Paris peace conference in 1919.⁴ He was, one hopes, quickly enlightened by the flood of propaganda produced by both the Serbs and Romanians who sought to gain possession of the territory from defeated Hungary.⁵ With an area of 28,523 square kilometres and a population of some one and a half million, the Banat was bounded on three sides by the River Maros (to the north), the River Tisza (to the west) and the Danube (to the south). As R. W. Seton-Watson wrote at the time of the conference, 'ethnographically there is no district in all Europe where the races are so inextricably mingled as in the Banat'.⁶ Consisting of the three formerly Hungarian counties of Temes, Torontál and Krassó-Szörény, the Banat was, as Seton-Watson suggested, inhabited by numerous nationalities. The four largest groups were the Romanians at 37.4% of the total population, the 'Swabians' (ethnic Germans) at 24.5%, the Serbs at 18% and the Hungarians at 15.3%.⁷

Wiesbaden, 1965, pp. 125–26. For a discussion of the Transylvanian dispute and the Vienna Award of 1940, see, for example, A. Simion, *Dicatul de la Viena*, Cluj, 1972. Notable exceptions to this general lack of interest in the dispute over the Serbian Banat are provided by Eugene Boia in *Romania's Diplomatic Relations with Yugoslavia in the Inter-war Period, 1919–1941*, Boulder CO, 1993, esp. pp. 291–308 (hereafter, Boia). See also Eugene B. Boia, 'România și problema Banatului Iugoslav în primăvara anului 1941', *Revista istorică*, 5, 1994, 9–10, pp. 1013–27; and Ottmar Trașcă, 'Diferende româno-maghiare în problema Banatului Sârbesc — martie-iunie 1941' in Mihai Timofte (ed.), *Concepte și metodologii în studiul relațiilor internaționale*, Iași, 1997, pp. 149–59.

³ Trașcă, for example, limits his discussion to the Romanian government memorandum of 23 April 1941: see *ibid.*, p. 157. See also Otto Trașcă, 'Aspects of the Romanian-Hungarian relations between 1940 and 1941', *Transylvanian Review*, 4, 1995, 4, pp. 45–59. For the assertion that Germany offered the Serbian Banat to Romania, see K. St Pavlowitch, 'Yugoslavia and Rumania, 1941', *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 21, 1964, 4, pp. 451–72 (462). Pavlowitch's claim is repeated by Boia: see, Boia, p. 294.

⁴ Quoted in Sherman David Spector, *Romania at the Paris Peace Conference: A study in the diplomacy of Ioan I. C. Brătianu*, Iași, 1995, p. 101.

⁵ For the Serbian arguments for claiming the Banat, see, for example, Jovan Radonić, *The Banat and the Serbo-Roumanian Frontier Problem*, Paris, 1919. For the Romanian case, see George G. Mironesco (translated by D. Cocking), *The Problem of the Banat*, Paris, 1919.

⁶ R. W. Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, London, 1919, pp. 335–37 (337).

⁷ The statistics are from a Hungarian census of 1910. See, Andrea Schmidt-Rösler, *Rumänien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Die Grenzziehung in der Dobruzscha und im Banat und die Folgeprobleme*, Frankfurt/Main, 1994, pp. 199, 243. Sherman David Spector puts the population at some 600,000 Romanians, 385,000 Germans, 358,000 Serbs and 240,000 Hungarians. See, Spector, *Romania at the Paris Peace Conference*, p. 147.

The Romanian delegation at the Paris peace conference in 1919 was led by the National Liberal premier Ioan I. C. Brătianu, whose aggressive advocacy of Romania's territorial claims quickly made him unpopular. Brătianu based his claim to the whole of the Banat on ethnic criteria, since the Romanians were the single largest nationality in the region. He also used the secret treaty of August 1916, which had brought Romania into the First World War on the side of the Triple Entente, to justify Romania's claim. The treaty had promised the Romanian government the entirety of the Banat as well as Transylvania, the Bukovina and the Hungarian counties inhabited by Romanians (the so-called 'Tisza frontier') as the reward for Romanian military support for the Allies. After much acrimony at the peace conference, and Brătianu's threat to resign and allow the Bolsheviks to invade Romania if he did not receive the Banat in its entirety, the region was divided.⁸ Hungary received a small portion of the historic Banat south of Szeged, while three-fifths of the remainder was awarded to Romania (which was thereafter known as the Romanian Banat) and two-fifths to the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes.⁹ While Romania thus received the lion's share of the Banat, the remaining western portion was incorporated into the South Slav kingdom and became known as the Serbian Banat. Hungary was forced to recognize these new frontiers under the terms of the 1920 Treaty of Trianon. Meanwhile the intricate details of the Serbian Banat's eastern border with Romania were finalized in a convention of 1923.¹⁰ The partition, worked out between 1920 and 1923, was based on the need to ensure a relative equilibrium in the number of South Slavs and Romanians who were destined to live on the 'wrong side' of the new political border which divided the Banat in two. Thus, some 75,000 Romanians were left in the South Slav kingdom, while some 65,000 South Slavs found themselves on Romanian soil.¹¹

Despite the animosity created between the Romanians and the South Slavs during the peace conference, Romania and Yugoslavia became allies in 1921 and were to remain so for the duration of the inter-war period. Romanian foreign policy, like that of Yugoslavia, was based on maintaining the country's territorial integrity within the borders established by the Paris peace treaties. Both Romania and Yugoslavia were members of the Little Entente (which also included Czechoslovakia) and of the Balkan Entente (in which Romania and Yugoslavia were joined by Greece and Turkey). These alliances aimed to protect the participating countries against Hungarian and Bulgarian revisionism respectively. By the mid-1930s, however, the growth of German economic and political influence in East Central Europe and the re-entry of the Soviet Union into international affairs necessitated better relations with the Reich on Romania's part. Germany alone was seen as powerful enough to protect Romania against the Soviet Union, which coveted the former Russian province of Bessarabia, gained by Romania in 1918. At the same time, Romanian foreign-policy makers also sought good relations with the Reich in order to prevent the German foreign ministry or Nazi leadership from backing Hungary's revisionist demands at Romania's expense. In particular, the Romanians feared that Germany might support Hungary's claim to Transylvania. By 1940

⁸ For Brătianu and the peace conference, see *ibid.*, esp. pp. 147–50.

⁹ Rösler, *Rumänien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, p. 337.

¹⁰ The complications of the Serbian-Romanian border were such that it takes Rösler a full five pages to describe them. See *ibid.*, pp. 300–04.

¹¹ A workable distribution of railway and river communications in both countries was also a consideration in drawing up the new border. See Ivo J. Lederer, *Yugoslavia at the Paris Peace Conference*, New Haven, 1963, p. 181.

the Romanian government increasingly regarded Germany as the mediator in its disputes with the Soviet Union and Hungary.¹²

Economic and political concessions to the Reich, however, did not prevent the truncation of Romanian territory by her revisionist neighbours in the summer of 1940. The loss of Bessarabia and the northern Bukovina in late June to the Soviet Union was followed by King Carol II's moves towards an alliance with Germany in an effort to forestall further territorial claims by the Soviet Union and Hungary. Nevertheless, under the Vienna Award of August 30 1940, Romania was forced to cede northern Transylvania to Hungary. In September, Romania was also forced to relinquish sovereignty over southern Dobruja to Bulgaria. King Carol was compelled to abdicate as a result of popular indignation at these territorial losses. General Ion Antonescu, in alliance with the Legionary movement, headed by Horia Sima, now assumed power and brought Carol's policy of seeking alliance with Germany to fruition. The German military mission, which Carol had first requested in the summer of 1940, arrived in Romania on October 14 1940. A period of further military and economic collaboration between the two countries ensued, and on November 23 Romania entered the Tripartite Pact.¹³ Antonescu now hoped that he would be able to win back the territories lost in 1940 through alliance with the Reich, and loyal participation in the planned invasion of the Soviet Union.

The pro-German policy initiated by King Carol necessarily affected Romania's relations with her former allies. Relations with Yugoslavia had already become frosty by the summer of 1940 owing to the lack of Yugoslav support during Romania's diplomatic conflicts with the Soviets over Bessarabia and with Hungary over Transylvania. Indeed, in June, the month in which the Soviets invaded and occupied Bessarabia, the Yugoslav government finally established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. In late September 1940, General Antonescu declared all pacts, accords and diplomatic agreements of the previous royal governments to be invalid, thus annulling Romania's alliances with Yugoslavia. Relations between Romania and Yugoslavia were not improved by the signing of the Yugoslav-Hungarian 'treaty of eternal friendship' in December 1940. Romanian officials feared that an agreement had been reached as part of the treaty whereby Hungary was to have a free hand to annex that part of Transylvania still under Romanian sovereignty while Yugoslavia was to receive the Romanian Banat.¹⁴

The Background: German Foreign Policy in the Balkans

It was, however, only as a result of the Reich's invasion of Yugoslavia that the Serbian Banat should have exercised the minds of Romanian foreign-policy makers in April 1941. The attack on Yugoslavia was the result of Hitler's need to secure the Balkans before launching Operation Barbarossa. Yet the Balkans had never been envisaged as an object of German expansion but rather as the Reich's economic hinterland, and as a source of military

¹² For Romania's increasingly pro-German foreign policy under King Carol II, and the influence of pro-German elements in Romania, see Rebecca Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany, 1936-40*, Basingstoke and New York, 2000.

¹³ The original Tripartite Pact between Germany, Italy and Japan was signed on September 27 1940. It obliged the signatories to mutual assistance if any of them were attacked by a power not already at war.

¹⁴ Boia, pp. 272-87.

manpower and resources. Mussolini's invasion of Greece on October 28 1940, and Great Britain's support for Greece under the terms of the political guarantee of April 1939, however, placed Hitler's plans for Operation Barbarossa in jeopardy.¹⁵ Italian forces were soon suffering reversals with the Greeks even penetrating into Italian-held Albania. Worse still, Greek airfields were made available to the Royal Air Force, with presumed implications for the security of the Romanian oil fields on which the Reich depended for supplies of petroleum. Mussolini's action thus brought the Balkans under the direct gaze of the Reich's military and diplomatic leaders. On November 12 1940, Hitler issued the directive for Operation Marita with the aim of securing Italy's position in the Balkans and eliminating British military and diplomatic influence in the region. The directive envisaged a build-up of German troops in the Balkans, ready for an invasion of the northern Aegean in the spring of 1941.¹⁶

Within this overall strategy, however, Yugoslavia's attitude to the Reich needed clarification. Although the Yugoslav government had moved closer to the Axis in the late 1930s, Prince Paul, head of the government, was strongly pro-British. Hitler had, therefore, reason to fear that a British-backed 'front' including Yugoslavia, Greece and Turkey could take shape in the Balkans.¹⁷ The Yugoslav government's freedom of action, however, became increasingly limited as neighbouring states entered the Axis camp. In late November 1940, Yugoslavia's Hungarian and Romanian neighbours joined the Tripartite Pact. On March 1 1941 Bulgaria followed suit and the German 12th army subsequently entered Bulgaria in preparation for the launch of Operation Marita. Yugoslavia was now surrounded by Axis allies and their troops. In these circumstances, the government felt compelled to sign the Tripartite Pact on March 25 1941 in Vienna. This was followed only two days later by a military coup led by General Simović, commander-in-chief of the Yugoslav air force, which unseated Prince Paul's government. Like many contemporary observers and subsequent historians, Hitler assumed that the Simović government, brought to power on the crest of an anti-Axis wave, would be anti-Nazi in its foreign policy.¹⁸ He therefore decided to attack and dismember Yugoslavia.¹⁹ In reality, however, the new Yugoslav government was faced by the same problems as that of Prince Paul: it was surrounded by Axis forces and did not believe that the Croats and Slovenes in the Yugoslav army could be trusted to fight against the Germans. Hence, on April 3, the Yugoslav government informed the Germans and Italians that 'it remained faithful to [...] the agreement of Vienna of March 25'.²⁰ The Yugoslav government's declaration came too late, however, since by this stage German military plans for the invasion of Yugoslavia had been laid.

¹⁵ Ernst L. Presseisen, 'Prelude to "Barbarossa": Germany and the Balkans, 1940-1941', *Journal of Modern History*, 32, March-December 1960, pp. 359-70 (361).

¹⁶ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *Hitler's War Directives, 1939-1945*, London, 1966, pp. 90-92.

¹⁷ Presseisen, 'Prelude to "Barbarossa"', p. 363. For Yugoslavia's foreign policy, see J. B. Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis, 1934-1941*, New York, 1962, esp. pp. 212-96. For Yugoslav relations with Britain, see Philipp W. Fabry, *Balkan-Wirren 1940-41. Diplomatische und militärische Vorbereitung des deutschen Donauübergangs*, Darmstadt, 1966, pp. 58-70, 118-25.

¹⁸ Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, p. 296.

¹⁹ On German policy towards Yugoslavia up until the invasion of April 1941, see Klaus Olshausen, *Zwischenspiel auf dem Balkan. Die deutsche Politik gegenüber Jugoslawien und Griechenland von März bis Juli 1941*, Stuttgart, 1973, pp. 9-41.

²⁰ Quoted in Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, p. 284.

The German Decision to Attack and Dismember Yugoslavia: The Hungarian and Romanian Reactions

In his meeting with military commanders on March 27 1941, the day of the Simović coup, Hitler pronounced Yugoslavia to be ‘an uncertain factor with respect to the coming Marita action and even more in regard to the Barbarossa Operation later on’.²¹ He announced his decision to destroy Yugoslavia and added that he intended to award Yugoslavia’s Adriatic coastline to Italy, Macedonia to Bulgaria, and the Serbian Banat to Hungary. While Italy, Bulgaria and Hungary were to be asked to provide military support, Romania’s participation in the attack was not envisaged. The Romanian army’s mission, the Führer had already decided, was to be limited to protecting Romania’s frontiers with Yugoslavia and the Soviet Union.²²

Hungary’s participation in the planned campaign, however, would contravene the ‘treaty of eternal friendship’ signed with Yugoslavia on 10 December 1940. Article 1 of the treaty had declared, somewhat bombastically, that ‘between the Kingdom of Hungary and the Kingdom of Yugoslavia there shall be permanent peace and eternal friendship’.²³ The existence of the treaty, it seems, did not prevent Admiral Horthy from reacting to the news of Hitler’s plan to invade Yugoslavia and award the Serbian Banat to Hungary ‘with unrestrained enthusiasm’.²⁴ The belief that the Western powers would eventually defeat the Germans, however, had prompted the government, led by Pál Teleki, to pursue a foreign policy of balance between Britain and Germany. Through the treaty with Yugoslavia, Teleki had hoped to reassure the British government of Hungary’s good intentions towards the West, notwithstanding Hungary’s revisionist ambitions and her adherence to the Tripartite Pact.²⁵ Horthy’s statement at the Supreme War Council held on April 1 was thus somewhat more sober than his initial reaction to the news of the planned attack, although it did not mask Hungary’s territorial ambitions. The Admiral declared Hungary’s role in the war against Yugoslavia to be ‘limited to the liberation of fellow Magyars’. This was, however, to await the expected Croatian declaration of independence which would signal the final dissolution of the Yugoslav state.²⁶ Although the Hungarian army did not enter Yugoslavia until April 11, the day Croatia proclaimed its independence, this had less to do with Horthy’s declarations of April 1 than to the German decision, taken on April 5, to postpone the Hungarian occupation of the Serbian Banat. This decision was the result of the Romanian reaction to news of the impending war against, and proposed dissolution of, Yugoslavia.

The view of the Third Reich as all-powerful in foreign policy, and the cynical manipulator of its unwilling satellites is, perhaps, responsible for the claims that German officials demanded Romanian military intervention against Yugoslavia. Indeed, it has been claimed that the Germans attempted to bribe General Antonescu to assist in the invasion of Yugoslavia by offering him the Serbian Banat as a reward. According to this version of events, the general

²¹ *Documents on German Foreign Policy, Series D: 1937–1945*, 14 vols, Washington DC, London and Arlington VA, 1949–76 (hereafter *DGFP, D*), vol. 12, no. 217, Minutes of a conference regarding the situation in Yugoslavia, Berlin, March 27 1941.

²² *Ibid.*, and *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 256, Führer’s directive no. 26, Führer’s headquarters, April 3 1941.

²³ Gyula Juhász, *Hungarian Foreign Policy 1919–1945*, Budapest, 1979, p. 179.

²⁴ Thomas Sakmyster, *Hungary’s Admiral on Horseback: Miklós Horthy, 1918–1944*, New York, 1994, p. 256.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 229–30, 253.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 259–62. The decision to take part in the attack on Yugoslavia led to Teleki’s suicide on April 3.

was threatened with Hungarian occupation of the Serbian Banat if he did not comply. Antonescu, however, manfully resisted German temptation, thus forcing the Germans to back down.²⁷ In reality, however, there is no evidence that Hitler wavered in his decision that Romania should remain a non-participant in military action against Yugoslavia. On April 3, Hitler issued directive no. 26 which confirmed Romania's passive role during the planned invasion.²⁸ Moreover, he never withdrew his promise to the Hungarians to award them the Serbian Banat.²⁹

Such was the subordinate role assigned to Romania in the German military campaign that General Antonescu was only officially informed of the German decision to invade Yugoslavia on the evening of April 5 1941, the day before the attack took place. The Romanian government, however, was clearly aware of the impending destruction of its former ally. On March 31, Antonescu had already informed the Yugoslav minister in Bucharest that Romania would not take part in any action resulting in changes to political structures in the Balkans. On the same day, the General confirmed this to the Italian minister in Bucharest.³⁰

The Romanian government, however, was suspicious that Hungary had been given permission by the Germans to annex the Serbian Banat and this prompted Antonescu to adopt a more belligerent tone in dealing with German officials. This is evident in his conversation with Marshal von Brauchitsch, Commander-in-Chief of the German army, on April 3.³¹ Romania, Antonescu asserted, would not take part in any military action against Yugoslavia. Echoing Hitler's decision regarding the role of Romania in the attack on Yugoslavia, Antonescu confirmed that he envisioned the Romanian army's mission as that of backing up German operations in the event of any Soviet intervention.³² If Hungarian troops were to

²⁷ For this view, see K. St Pawlowitch, 'Yugoslavia and Rumania, 1941', *Journal of Central European Affairs*, 21, 1964, 4, pp. 451–72 (462). This claim is repeated by Boia, see Boia, p. 294. According to the memoirs of Alexandru Cretzianu, who had served as 'secretary-general' at the Romanian foreign ministry, 'the Axis made a very special effort in Bucharest to bring Antonescu into this dastardly aggression' but that 'Antonescu's resolute attitude had the desired effect. The Germans did not insist further that we join them against Yugoslavia'. See, Alexandru Cretzianu, *Relapse into Bondage: Political Memoirs of a Romanian Diplomat, 1918–1947*, Iași and Oxford, 1998, pp. 235–36. In a similar vein, see Raoul V. Bossy (edited and translated by G. H. and M.-A. Bossy), *Recollections of a Romanian Diplomat, 1918–1969: Diaries and Memoirs*, 2 vols, Stanford, 2003, vol. 2, p. 419. Bossy was Romanian minister in Berlin at the time of the Serbian Banat crisis.

²⁸ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 256, Führer's directive no. 26, Führer's headquarters, April 3 1941. The closest the Reich appears to have come to asking Romania to participate in military action was a warning to Antonescu on April 3 that Yugoslavia intended to sabotage Danube traffic. In this event, the Germans would expect Romania to take counter-measures. The crisis passed once the Romanian government made it clear to the Yugoslavs that they would take action in the event of attacks on the Danube: Boia, 'România și problema Banatului Iugoslav în primăvară anului 1941', p. 1015. Antonescu did, however, register his objection to the German plan to send Hungarian troops into the Serbian Banat by refusing to transfer Romanian troops to the east of Timișoara, which the Reich had requested in order to improve communications between German and Hungarian troops. See Keith Hitchins, *Rumania 1866–1947*, Oxford, 1994, p. 470.

²⁹ This point is made by Neubacher, the Reich's Special Commissioner for Economic Questions. See Hermann Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost 1940–1945. Bericht eines fliegenden Diplomaten*, Göttingen, 1957, p. 127.

³⁰ Trașcă, 'Diferende româno-maghiare în problema Banatului Sârbesc — martie-iunie 1941', p. 154.

³¹ Ekkehard Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941–1944. Die deutsche, die ungarische und andere Volksgruppen*, Munich, 1991, p. 17.

³² On 1 April, the Yugoslav government had turned to the Soviet Union for assistance. A friendship and non-aggression treaty between the two countries was signed on April 6. See Boia, p. 295, and Hoptner, *Yugoslavia in Crisis*, pp. 276–81.

occupy the Serbian Banat, however, the weight of public opinion in Romania would force him to intervene.³³ The possibility of Romanian intervention in the event of Hungary's entry into the Serbian Banat was hinted at again on the following day, during the conversation between the Romanian minister in Berlin, Raoul Bossy, and the German foreign minister, von Ribbentrop. Although Bossy assured von Ribbentrop that the Romanian government was 'not opening the problem of the Serbian Banat', it could not allow Hungarian troops to enter the area.³⁴

These worrying indications of a possible Romanian military response to the annexation of the Serbian Banat by Hungary received further confirmation the next day. On the evening of April 5, Hermann Neubacher, the Reich's Special Commissioner for Economic Questions, travelled to General Antonescu's villa in the Carpathians to inform him officially of the coming invasion. On hearing the news, Antonescu responded that Romania had good relations with Yugoslavia and had no territorial claims against her and would therefore remain neutral in the conflict. He then asked Neubacher who would occupy the Serbian Banat. When Neubacher claimed ignorance, Antonescu charged him with informing Hitler that if Hungary entered the Banat, Romanian troops would have to march in too, and conflict would be bound to ensue. According to his memoirs, Neubacher then rushed back to Bucharest to telephone Berlin with this information.³⁵

As a result of these alarming indications of the Romanian government's possible military intervention, the German-planned Hungarian invasion of the Serbian Banat was called off at the last minute. Hence, a directive issued by the German High Command on 5 April stated that deployment of Hungarian troops east of the lower Tisza, in other words in the Serbian Banat, 'was not desired'.³⁶ On the same day, representatives of the German foreign ministry, including von Ribbentrop, were at pains to inform Bossy and Antonescu that Hungarian troops would not be allowed to operate east of the Tisza in the Serbian Banat, but would take part in military action only to the west of the river.³⁷

Romanian-Hungarian Tensions and their Consequences for the Reich's Policy towards the Serbian Banat

In the summer of 1940, the Germans had greatly feared that war would break out between the Hungarians, whose revisionist claims were receiving Soviet backing, and the Romanians over the Transylvanian dispute. Requests by the Romanians for German and Italian mediation

³³ Arhiva Ministerului Afacerilor Externe (Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Bucharest), (hereafter, MAE), fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 214–15, unnumbered telegram, to the legations in Berlin and Rome, April 3 1941, from General Antonescu.

³⁴ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 224–26, telegram no. 41187, from the legation in Berlin to the foreign ministry in Bucharest, April 4 1941. See also, Raoul V. Bossy, *Reflections of a Romanian Diplomat*, vol. 2, p. 404.

³⁵ Neubacher, *Sonderauftrag Südost*, p. 126.

³⁶ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 256, Führer's directive no. 26, Führer's headquarters, 3 April 1941, footnote 1.

³⁷ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, p. 230, telegram no. 41193, legation in Berlin to the foreign ministry in Bucharest, April 5 1941, from Bossy; *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 276, the foreign ministry to the legation in Romania, April 5 1941, from von Ribbentrop; *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 277, memorandum by Ambassador Ritter, Berlin, April 5 1941.

forced the Axis to intervene to prevent a regional conflict.³⁸ The Germans were also conscious of the extent to which Romanian–Hungarian relations had deteriorated since the signing of the Vienna Award in August 1940 which had, officially at least, ended the Transylvanian dispute. News of atrocities committed by the Hungarian authorities against the Romanian population in northern Transylvania was quickly brought to the attention of the German foreign ministry. These included claims that the whole male Romanian population of the villages of Trăsnea and Ip had been massacred and that eighteen Legionaries in Târgu Mureş had been murdered.³⁹

So great was the tension between the two countries in the autumn of 1940 that it had even affected Hungary and Romania's entry into the Tripartite Pact. Speaking to a German foreign ministry official on October 18, the Romanian diplomat Valer Pop registered his dismay at the prospect of Hungary joining the pact a full twenty-four hours before Romania. This, Pop averred, would cause 'bewilderment' amongst the Romanian public.⁴⁰ The matter was finally resolved by a compromise. Although it proved impossible to prevent Hungary from being first to sign the pact, on November 20, the Romanians were mollified by the fact that the signing took place in provincial Vienna. The Romanian delegation signed the Tripartite Pact amidst much pomp in Berlin, on November 23.⁴¹

Romania and Hungary were now, technically at least, allies. The question of the treatment of the Romanian population in northern Transylvania continued, however, to be a source of friction between the two countries throughout the winter and spring of 1940–41 and right through the Yugoslav crisis. The Romanians continued to request German and Italian mediation in their disputes with Hungary over Transylvania.⁴² German leaders were thus fully aware of how easily Romanian–Hungarian animosity could be enflamed. This in turn could imperil German plans for the invasion of the Soviet Union.

Accordingly, on April 12 1941 following the successful blitzkrieg assault on Yugoslavia, the German High Command placed the Serbian Banat under direct German military administration. Only the area west of the Tisza, outside the Serbian Banat, was placed under Hungarian control.⁴³ The German foreign ministry warned Hungary not to cross the Tisza on pain of the 'gravest consequences'.⁴⁴ It seems clear, however, that the Germans initially expected their military administration of the Serbian Banat to be brief. Indeed, on April 19, during his conversation with the Hungarian minister in Berlin, Dóme Sztójay, Hitler indicated that he

³⁸ For the events leading up to the Vienna Award of 1940, see Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany*, pp. 148–59.

³⁹ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 80, p. 235, telegram no. 60333, to the legation in Berlin from the foreign ministry in Bucharest, September 27 1940.

⁴⁰ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 80, pp. 345–48, telegram no. 40576, from the legation in Berlin to the foreign ministry in Bucharest, October 18 1940, signed Valeriu Pop.

⁴¹ MAE, 71/Germania, vol. 81, pp. 89–104, 'Romania's entry into the Tripartite Pact, November 23 1940'.

⁴² On May 13 1941, for instance, the Romanians reported that Hungary was refusing to cooperate with Axis recommendations that Romanian refugees be allowed to return to their homes in Hungarian-controlled northern Transylvania and that a statute be drawn up to regulate the organization and rights of the Romanians. The Romanian government requested German and Italian mediation. See, MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 370–72, telegram no. 35399, to the legations in Berlin and Rome from the foreign ministry in Bucharest, May 13 1941.

⁴³ Hillgruber, *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu*, p. 125.

⁴⁴ C. A. Macartney, *October Fifteenth: a History of Modern Hungary, 1939–1945*, 2 parts, Edinburgh, 1956–57, part 2, p. 12.

believed the German occupation of the Serbian Banat might last only a few months.⁴⁵ This would prepare the way for the Hungarian occupation of the region and eventual sovereignty over it.

As it transpired, German fears of a Romanian–Hungarian conflict, and Hitler’s personal admiration for General Antonescu, forced the Germans to prevaricate on the issue of exactly when Hungary was to acquire the Serbian Banat. As early as April 3, when Hitler issued the directive concerning the attack on Yugoslavia, he made it clear that he was fully aware of Romanian sensitivities with regard to Hungary. Confirming Romania’s role as a non-participant in the attack, he added that ‘should General Antonescu express fear that Hungary might become hostile toward Romania, it should be stated that this danger does not exist because Germany would not permit it’.⁴⁶ In his conversation with Sztójay on April 19, Hitler explained that the Serbian Banat would eventually revert to Hungary but that the Hungarian government needed to understand General Antonescu’s position. Antonescu, Hitler explained, had rendered important economic and military service to Germany.⁴⁷ In a meeting with Admiral Horthy on April 24, Hitler repeated that he acknowledged Hungary’s claim on the Serbian Banat, but explained that the territory could not be annexed immediately for fear of offending Antonescu.⁴⁸

Of Hitler’s high opinion of the General there can be no doubt. Paul Schmidt, Hitler’s interpreter, relates in his memoirs that the Führer had been most impressed by Antonescu’s two-hour rant against the terms of the August 1940 Vienna Award and Romania’s loss of northern Transylvania. This had occurred during Antonescu’s visit to Hitler on November 22 1940, despite the Germans having categorically warned him not to mention the Vienna Award and its shortcomings in front of Hitler. “‘That always impressed me’”, said Hitler many times in my presence on later occasions’, wrote Schmidt.⁴⁹ During his subsequent meeting with Antonescu in January 1941, Hitler declared that ‘in all Europe there are two heads of state with whom I like to work: Mussolini and General Antonescu’.⁵⁰

On April 14, however, the Hungarian army leadership, impatient to restore the boundaries of pre-Trianon Hungary, approached the Germans for official permission to occupy the northern point of the Serbian Banat up to the Vranjevo–Kikinda railway line. This action was apparently meant as a rebuke for Romania’s role in preventing the Hungarians from entering the Serbian Banat as originally planned.⁵¹ Von Ribbentrop’s response was to inform the Hungarian government that ‘the Führer requests that any idea of having Hungarian troops enter the Banat be abandoned, since the Romanians were promised that only German troops would enter the Banat’. Von Ribbentrop added, however, that ‘this does not signify that any position whatever is taken against later Hungarian demands regarding this area, but is only a

⁴⁵ Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941–1944*, p. 21.

⁴⁶ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 256, Führer’s directive no. 26, Führer’s headquarters, April 3 1941.

⁴⁷ Ottmar Trașcă, ‘Diferende româno-maghiare în problema Banatului Sârbesc — martie–iunie 1941’, p. 156.

⁴⁸ Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, part 2, p. 13. Hitler apparently told Horthy that ‘the Banat is yours’, *ibid.*, footnote 5.

⁴⁹ Paul Schmidt, *Statist auf diplomatischer Bühne 1923–1945*, Bonn, 1949, p. 511. Antonescu was also the first foreigner to receive the Iron Cross from the Germans. See Joseph Rothschild, *East-Central Europe between the Two World Wars*, Seattle WA, 1975, p. 317.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Gh. Buzatu, *Mareșalul Antonescu în fața istoriei*, Iași, 2 vols, 1990, vol. 1, doc. 27, pp. 177–80.

⁵¹ It was apparently the Bulgarian minister in Bucharest who had informed his Hungarian counterpart of Romania’s role in preventing a Hungarian occupation of the Serbian Banat. See, Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941–1944*, pp. 18–19.

safeguard in order to prevent clashes between Hungarian and Romanian troops'.⁵² The High Command of the German army, nevertheless, decided to allow the Hungarian army to enter the north of the Serbian Banat because of possible Serbian resistance in the area. Consequently, on April 15 the Hungarians took hold of a vital bridgehead in the Serbian Banat. The German army's decision, which was in flat contradiction to the foreign ministry's position of keeping Hungarian troops out of the Banat entirely, only served to inflame tensions between Romania and Hungary. Thus, on April 15, General Antonescu demanded that Hungarian troops be withdrawn from the area. The news of the occupation, Antonescu informed Manfred von Killinger, the German Minister in Bucharest, had greatly affected and 'depressed' sections of the Romanian army.⁵³ Consequently, on April 17 the German High Command ordered the Hungarian troops to withdraw from the area for fear of a conflict with Romania. German Army Corps 41 was now to occupy the whole of the Serbian Banat to prevent the Hungarians from crossing the Tisza.⁵⁴

Contradictions in German Foreign Policy

Although Hitler's promise to the Hungarians that they would receive the Serbian Banat was never withdrawn, this could clearly not be conveyed to the Romanians in so many words. The foreign ministry's standard response to Romanian enquiries regarding the future disposal of the region was that 'the fate of areas belonging to Yugoslavia will not be settled until the conclusion of peace'.⁵⁵ Over the following months, and indeed years, this remained the German foreign ministry's official line in dealing with the Romanians. At the same time, the foreign ministry was determined that German officials should not actively encourage the Romanians to lay claim to the Serbian Banat.⁵⁶

Given the ambiguity in the foreign ministry's strategy for dealing with the Romanians, it is hardly surprising that the Romanians received conflicting statements with regard to the Serbian Banat from German officials. This was to sow the seeds of further confusion concerning the ultimate fate of the region. On May 2 1941, for instance, Bossy in Berlin reported to Antonescu his conversation with Meissner, the head of the Führer's chancellery. Meissner had apparently informed Bossy that 'the trust which the Romanians and their Leader have placed in the Führer will not be betrayed' and that Romania would in due course 'receive the Serbian Banat'.⁵⁷ Sadly for the Romanians, however, two further meetings between Bossy and Meissner later in the month confirmed that on May 2 Meissner had only been 'speaking personally' and 'as a friend of Romania' rather than as the Führer's representative. Thus, according to Meissner, although the Führer had 'confirmed his belief in Romania under Antonescu', a definite decision regarding the Serbian Banat had not yet been reached.⁵⁸

⁵² DGFP, D, vol. 12, no. 340, The foreign minister to the legation in Hungary, Berlin, April 14 1941.

⁵³ Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941-1944*, p. 19.

⁵⁴ Olshausen, *Zwischenspiel auf dem Balkan*, p. 110.

⁵⁵ DGFP, D, vol. 12, no. 330, The foreign ministry to the legation in Romania, April 13 1941.

⁵⁶ See, for example, DGFP, D, vol. 12, no. 376, The *dirigent* in the political department to the legation in Romania, April 21 1941, Rintelen.

⁵⁷ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 318-19, telegram no. 41270, from the legation in Berlin to the foreign ministry in Bucharest, May 2 1941, Bossy.

⁵⁸ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 351-52, telegram no. 41294 from the legation in Berlin to the foreign ministry in Bucharest, May 8 1941, Bossy, *ibid.*, pp. 361-64, telegram no. 80109, legation in Berlin to General Antonescu, May 11 1941, Bossy.

The confusion prevailing among state and Nazi Party foreign-policy organizations within the Third Reich, and the resulting contradictory foreign-policy positions, is by now well known.⁵⁹ It seems likely that members of the German foreign ministry may themselves not have been aware of Hitler's decision to award the Serbian Banat to Hungary, and were confused about German policy on the matter. On May 12 1941, Manfred von Killinger, the German minister in Bucharest, complained to the German foreign ministry that he was not receiving sufficient information from Berlin to enable him to carry out his duties in Bucharest. He was, he claimed, compelled to receive his information either from members of the German forces stationed in Romania or, worse still, from the Romanians themselves. 'The fact that Romania will not receive the Banat', wrote the exasperated von Killinger, 'I had to learn by my having called attention to Romania's claims and recently through the Meissner-Bossy case.'⁶⁰

The Romanian Claim to the Serbian Banat and the Possibility of Romanian Military Intervention

Von Killinger's allusion to 'Romania's claims' referred to an earlier telegram he had sent to the German foreign ministry on April 17 in which he apparently suggested that the Serbian Banat be awarded to Romania. This had provoked a sharp reprimand from the foreign ministry in Berlin to the effect that German officials in Bucharest should not encourage the Romanians to believe that they would ever receive the Serbian Banat for 'in no case will such a solution be considered'. The foreign ministry concluded that 'Romanian agitation in this regard must in no circumstances receive any nourishment from conversations with the German Legation'.⁶¹ Defending his staff in Bucharest, von Killinger retorted that no one in the German legation was responsible for feeding the Romanians such hopes. Rather, the Romanians had been encouraged to believe they could gain the territory by the 'romanophile attitude of Italian journalists'. The Italian military and air attachés were also apparently openly supporting a Romanian annexation of the Serbian Banat.⁶²

It has been claimed that it was the German-Italian conference held in Vienna between April 20 and 22 between the Italian foreign minister Ciano and von Ribbentrop which prompted the Romanian government to make an outright claim on the Serbian Banat.⁶³

⁵⁹ The contradiction between the German foreign ministry's and the German army's response to the Hungarian army's request to enter into the north of the Serbian Banat on April 14 should also be noted. For an analysis of the 'structuralist' and 'intentionalist' schools of thought in connection with involvement of German state and Nazi party organizations in the National Legionary State and the Legionary rebellion of January 1941, see Rebecca Haynes, 'German Historians and the Romanian National Legionary State, 1940-1941', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 71, 1993, 4, pp. 676-83.

⁶⁰ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 497, The minister in Romania to the foreign ministry, Bucharest, May 12 1941, for Weizsäcker.

⁶¹ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 376, The *dirigent* in the political department to the legation in Romania, April 21 1941, Rintelen.

⁶² *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 382, The minister in Romania to the Foreign Ministry, Bucharest, April 22 1941. It would be entirely in keeping with the complications of German foreign policy if von Killinger had indeed been involved in encouraging the Romanians in their demands for the Serbian Banat. Such machinations would certainly explain Pavlowitch's claim that the Germans had offered the Romanians the Serbian Banat as their reward for taking part in the attack on Yugoslavia. At the time, Pavlowitch was a young diplomat at the Yugoslav embassy in Bucharest. See, Pavlowitch, 'Yugoslavia and Rumania, 1941', p. 462.

⁶³ Ottmar Trașcă, 'Diferende româno-maghiare în problema Banatului Sârbesc — martie-iunie 1941', p. 157; Hillgruber, *Hitler, König Carol und Marschall Antonescu*, p. 125.

According to this view, during the conference Ciano acquiesced to German plans for the disposal of Yugoslav territory, including the award of Baranya and Bácska to Hungary. These were the southern regions of the pre-First World War Hungarian counties of Baranya and Bács-Bodrog which lay to the west of the Tisza. The Serbian Banat was also to be accorded to Hungary following a period of German occupation.⁶⁴ News of these decisions thus apparently prompted the Romanian memorandum of April 23, which will be discussed below, in which the Romanian government officially laid claim to the Serbian Banat. Von Killinger's telegram of April 17 suggests, however, that the Romanians were already making claims to the Serbian Banat before the Vienna conference.

Romania's claim to the Serbian Banat was already implied in General Antonescu's conversation with Marshal von Brauchitsch on April 3. Antonescu threatened to send the Romanian army into the Serbian Banat if Hungarian troops invaded the area. He concluded suggestively that the historic pre-Trianon Banat had always been a single geographic, political and economic bloc and that 'its division was only accepted by us at Trianon in the face of force'.⁶⁵

It seems, moreover, that the Romanian army, which had deeply resented King Carol's failure to fight to retain Bessarabia and northern Transylvania in the summer of 1940, was already considering a possible incorporation of the Serbian Banat into Romania even before the German attack on Yugoslavia. A study, dated April 4 1941, drawn up by the High Command of the Romanian army included detailed ethnographical and historical information on the Romanians living in the Serbian Banat. The author of the study cast doubts on Yugoslav population statistics, which numbered the Banat Romanians at under 100,000, and claimed that the Romanian population was well in excess of that. The report also enumerated the Yugoslav government's apparently merciless 'serbianization' policies amongst the Romanian population and concluded that in the national interest, all Romanians should be brought together 'within our natural ethnic borders'.⁶⁶

Although the army's study contained no plan of military intervention in Yugoslavia, it seems that in some diplomatic and political circles there were rumours and fears that Romania might launch an attack. This is suggested by a letter of April 4 from Iuliu Maniu, leader of the National Peasant Party, to General Antonescu. In his letter, Maniu expressed his party's opposition both to German aggression against Yugoslavia and to any Romanian involvement therein. Maniu stressed the traditions of friendship between Romania and Yugoslavia. Romanian foreign policy, Maniu concluded, should only involve itself with the restoration of Romania's frontiers as they stood before the territorial losses of 1940.⁶⁷

⁶⁴ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 387, Memorandum by an official of the foreign minister's secretariat. Record of the conversation between the Reich Foreign Minister and Count Ciano at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna on 21 April 1941. On April 12, Hitler had already issued a directive awarding Baranya and Bácska, to Hungary. See Macartney, *October Fifteenth*, part 2, p. 13.

⁶⁵ MAE, 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 214-15, unnumbered telegram, to the legations in Berlin and Rome, April 3 1941, from General Antonescu.

⁶⁶ Arhivele Militare Române (Romanian Military Archives, Bucharest), fond 948/Marele Stat Major, vol. 579, 'A study of the Yugoslav Banat and Timoc', High Command of the Army, Section 2-a, Information, April 4 1941, pp. 42-56. According to the study, the Romanians living in Yugoslavia were even forced to protect themselves in death from the Serbs. Apparently, a stick was always placed in the coffin of a deceased Romanian to enable him to defend himself against Serbian attack in the nether world. *Ibid.*, p. 56.

⁶⁷ Arhivele Naționale, Sediul Central, București, (National Archives [formerly, State Archives], headquarters, Bucharest), (hereafter, Arh. Nat.) Fond Președinția Consiliului de Miniștri: Cabinetul Militar 1940-44, vol. 49/1940, p. 41, Letter from Iuliu Maniu to General Antonescu, Bucharest, April 4 1941.

Responding at great length to Maniu's letter only in late June 1941, the General stated that the Romanian government had never intended to become involved in hostilities against Yugoslavia.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Antonescu argued strongly in favour of Romania's right to the Serbian Banat. He based this claim on the treaty of August 1916 which had brought Romania into the First World War on the side of the Triple Entente and which had promised the whole of the Hungarian Banat to Romania. Antonescu also drew Maniu's attention to the Alba Iulia Declaration of December 1 1918 in which all the Romanians of the Habsburg Monarchy, including those of the whole Hungarian Banat, had allegedly declared their union with the Romanian kingdom. He went on to describe the process of 'serbianization' meted out by the Yugoslav government on the Romanians of Yugoslavia, including its failure to provide Romanian-language schools. Moreover, not only had Yugoslavia failed to give her Romanian ally any support at the time of the Soviet threat in June 1940, but the General alleged that Yugoslavia harboured revisionist aspirations against Romania. During the course of negotiations leading up to Yugoslavia's signing of the Tripartite Pact in March 1941, Antonescu believed that the Germans had yielded to Yugoslav demands to annex the Romanian Banat. In conclusion, the General stressed that Romania had legitimate national demands which applied to all Romanians who lived beyond the borders of the Romanian state. He accused Maniu of being solely concerned with the fate of the Romanians of northern Transylvania, now under Hungarian rule. The National Peasant Party, Antonescu argued, was out of touch with public opinion, which was demanding a Romanian occupation of the Serbian Banat.

It seems clear that Antonescu and the Romanian government were coming under considerable pressure from elements within Romania and beyond to annex the Serbian Banat, despite manifestations of pro-Yugoslav feeling in Romania during the German invasion of Yugoslavia.⁶⁹ On April 8, the Yugoslav airforce attacked the Romanian cities of Arad and Timișoara in the Romanian Banat, presumably in retaliation for the fact that German forces had invaded Yugoslavia from Romanian territory on April 6. As a result, Romanian newspapers began to campaign for the annexation of the Serbian Banat. Indeed, they now commonly referred to the whole of the historic, pre-Trianon Banat as 'the Romanian Banat'. Hence, on April 9 *Timpul* condemned the Yugoslav attacks on Romania and went on to claim that Romania had always been loyal to her former Yugoslav ally 'sacrificing for her the most valuable part of the Romanian Banat' after the First World War. On April 11 *Unirea* claimed that 'the Banat was and remains Romanian' and demanded that 'the Banat must be returned to us in its entirety'. The distinguished historian, Gheorghe Brătianu, also lent his voice to the growing clamour for annexation.⁷⁰

The Romanian government also came under pressure from Romanian groups living in the Serbian Banat. On April 14, a Romanian foreign-ministry memorandum recorded that a delegation of Romanian priests and teachers, representing the Romanians in the Serbian Banat, had requested the union of the region with Romania. This was considered necessary, so it was claimed, in order to protect the population from the Hungarian army 'and other armed bands'.⁷¹ In this atmosphere of heightened national feeling, the Yugoslav ambassador in Bucharest, Avakumović, fully expected a Romanian attack on Yugoslavia.⁷² Moreover, given

⁶⁸ Ibid., Letter from General Antonescu to Iuliu Maniu, Bucharest, June 22 1941, pp. 42–97.

⁶⁹ Pavlowitch, 'Yugoslavia and Rumania, 1941', pp. 461–62.

⁷⁰ Boia, 'România și problema Banatului Iugoslav în primăvara anului 1941', p. 1017.

⁷¹ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 249–53, Memorandum of April 14 1941.

⁷² Boia, 'România și problema Banatului Iugoslav în primăvara anului 1941', p. 1018.

the psychological effects on the Romanian population of the territorial amputations of the summer of 1940, and with the military campaign against the Soviet Union not yet begun, the Serbian Banat represented the only possible territorial compensation for Romania's losses of 1940.⁷³

Antonescu's personal belief that Romania's claim to the Serbian Banat was entirely justified is indicated in his response to Iuliu Maniu's letter of April 4. The General's belief, however, was long-standing. As a young Lieutenant-Colonel at the time of the Paris peace conference in 1919, Antonescu had written a pamphlet in defence of Romania's claims to the whole of the Banat. 'The Romanian people', he wrote, 'will not lay down their arms until the day when the whole Banat becomes theirs.' Although the Romanians had always had good relations with the Serbs, the young Antonescu believed that 'a future armed conflict, provoked by this question, cannot be excluded'.⁷⁴ In view of these indications of the General's youthful belligerence on the matter of the Banat, it seems likely that a Romanian-Hungarian war would have resulted from any Hungarian occupation of the Serbian Banat.

In the event, Romania did not invade the Serbian Banat owing to the restraining influence of the Third Reich. By March 27, Hitler had already decided that Romania was to stay out of the war and he was, moreover, prepared to forestall an immediate Hungarian annexation of the Serbian Banat in order to diffuse tension and prevent the Romanians from invading the province.⁷⁵ Once the German leadership had taken these decisions, Antonescu, as a loyal German ally, was hardly in a position to disobey his senior ally's command. Nevertheless, nationalist pressure both from within and beyond Romania, and the presence of Hungarian troops in Yugoslavia, kept the Serbian Banat problem alive.

The Romanian Claims to the Serbian Banat (and the Timoc Valley) and the German Response

In its memorandum to the German and Italian governments of April 23 1941, the Romanian government made its first official claim to the Serbian Banat. It was argued that Romania's right to the whole Banat had been recognized at the Paris peace conference. Only the need to give the city of Belgrade a strategic barrier, claimed the memorandum, had led to the amputation of 'the Romanian Banat'. The Romanian government, however, not only claimed the Serbian Banat in the memorandum, but also called for a revision of all the territorial changes made in the region in 1940 and 1941. This was justified on the grounds that ceding territory to Hungary and Bulgaria had transformed the political and racial equilibrium of the region with consequences for the security of Romania and of Europe in general. At the same time, the memorandum emphasized General Antonescu's loyalty to the Axis, especially in the economic sphere. Ominously, it was also pointed out that the Romanian public's anger at seeing Hungary and Bulgaria once again being rewarded at Romania's expense could serve to undermine the Romanian government's position and threaten the stability of the state.⁷⁶

⁷³ Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941-1944*, p. 21.

⁷⁴ Lt.-Colonel I. Antonescu, *Românii. Origina, trecutul, sacrificiile și drepturile lor*, sine loco, 1919, pp. 74, 84.

⁷⁵ Boia stresses the role of pro-Western politicians such as Iuliu Maniu and Constantin I. C. Brătianu, as well as the Yugoslav ambassador, Avakumović, and the young King Michael in intervening with Antonescu to avert a Romanian invasion of Yugoslavia. Boia concludes, however, that 'Berlin's attitude was the deciding factor in whether Bucharest stayed out of this conflict or not'. Boia, pp. 299-304 (303).

⁷⁶ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 269-76, Memorandum drawn up by Minister Mihai Antonescu and delivered to von Killinger, the German Minister, on April 23 1941; *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 387, Memorandum by an official of the foreign ministry, Berlin, April 23 1941.

As von Killinger explained in his letter to the German foreign ministry which accompanied the Romanian government memorandum of April 23, the result of Hungarian and Bulgarian expansion following the partition of Yugoslavia had been to prompt General Antonescu to put forward Romania's claim to the Serbian Banat. Antonescu had done this, wrote von Killinger, 'primarily in order to strengthen his position as Leader of State'. He added that 'a foreign policy success in this respect would strengthen the position of General Antonescu'.⁷⁷ Indeed, although the German authorities had already taken the decision to award the Serbian Banat to Hungary in due course, whatever they might say to the Romanians, they were clearly aware that Antonescu required 'a foreign policy success' to maintain popular support for his regime. It was, after all, the territorial losses of 1940 which had turned the army and the general population against King Carol and driven him to flee the country. The German government had no desire to see Romania destabilized in such a manner once again. During his discussion with Ciano in Vienna, von Ribbentrop noted 'the necessity of giving Romanian compensation elsewhere' for the loss of the Serbian Banat, but observed also 'the difficulties of finding something suitable'.⁷⁸

Since the Germans were unwilling to grant the Serbian Banat to Romania, and lacked any other immediate territorial compensation, it is hardly surprising that Romanian representatives were no more successful than they had been before issuing the memorandum in eliciting a definitive response about the fate of the Serbian Banat.⁷⁹ On May 14, Carl Clodius, a senior member of the Reich foreign ministry's economic policy department, shamelessly denied to Antonescu that the question of the Serbian Banat had been discussed at all during the Vienna talks between von Ribbentrop and Ciano.⁸⁰ During Antonescu's meeting with Hitler on June 11 1941, the Führer was more than usually vague and unspecific regarding Romania's territorial claims. He informed Antonescu only that 'after the conflict was over Romania would receive indemnities which, as far as Germany was concerned, had no territorial limitations'.⁸¹ General Antonescu's government, however, continued to be under pressure from nationalist elements both in Romania and in the Serbian Banat to annex the region to Romania.⁸² At the same time, the Romanians did not shy away from bombarding the German foreign ministry with propaganda supporting their claim to the Serbian Banat or from publishing articles in the Reich itself putting forward Romania's claim.⁸³

It seems, moreover, that the other nationalities who lived in the Serbian Banat may have viewed union with Romania as preferable to a return to domination by the Hungarians. On

⁷⁷ Ibid., enclosure, for the foreign minister through Weizsäcker, Bucharest, April 23 1941, von Killinger.

⁷⁸ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 398, Memorandum by an official of the foreign minister's secretariat. Results of the German-Italian discussions on the reorganization of the area of Yugoslavia, Vienna, April 24 1941.

⁷⁹ Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941-1944*, p. 29; Rotaru, Zodian, Burcin, *Mareşalul Ion Antonescu*, pp. 58-59.

⁸⁰ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 376-82, General Antonescu and Clodius at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, May 14 1941.

⁸¹ *DGFP, D*, vol. 12, no. 614, Memorandum by an official of the foreign minister's secretariat, Fuschl, June 13 1941.

⁸² For the many delegations of Romanians from the Serbian Banat to Bucharest, see Boia, pp. 304-08.

⁸³ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 390-91, telegram no. 36455, to Raoul Bossy, Romanian minister in Berlin from the foreign ministry, Bucharest, May 16 1941. Bossy was exhorted 'to collect together everything which can be of use' in the propaganda war. Articles published in Berlin included that of the distinguished Romanian academic Sextil Puşcariu, who, in his article 'Die Rumänien auf dem Balkan', justified Romania's right to the Serbian Banat by claiming that the Romanians were the original inhabitants of the region. See *Berliner Monatshefte*, vol. 19, 1941, pp. 406-15.

May 23 1941 the Romanian government received a report from Aurel Cosma, who had been the leader of the Romanian National Party of the Banat when it was still part of the Hungarian kingdom during the First World War. He had subsequently been appointed as a government prefect in the Romanian Banat. Cosma informed the government that representatives not only of the Romanians, but also of the 'Swabians' and Serbs of the Serbian Banat had come to Timișoara, the capital of the Romanian Banat, requesting that the region be annexed by Romania. The representatives apparently regarded this as 'the only way to return to normal life'. The three national groups had formed a common front because they could no longer live in what Cosma described as 'a country which belongs to no one'. Although the Serbian Banat was officially under German military control, in practice it seems that the German army had little or no presence in large areas of the region. This fact, according to the national representatives, served only to accentuate the 'no-man's-land character of this territory'. To make matters worse, pro-Hungarian propaganda was widespread in the region. In ethnically Hungarian villages triumphal arches had been constructed and inscribed with words of welcome for Hungarian troops, whose entry into the Serbian Banat was eagerly anticipated. The leader of the 'Swabians' in the Serbian Banat, Josef Janko, had specifically pleaded with the German government in Berlin not to allow the Hungarians to enter the Serbian Banat and had now joined forces with the local Romanian and Serbian leaders.⁸⁴ As a Romanian nationalist, Cosma may well have exaggerated the extent of pro-Romanian sentiment in the Serbian Banat. SD reports from the summer of 1941 suggest, however, that the inhabitants of the region did not desire a return to Hungarian rule and found the German military administration infinitely preferable.⁸⁵

It was doubtless as a result of such pressures, as well as of his personal inclinations, that General Antonescu sent a further memorandum to Berlin on June 11 1941 for the personal attention of von Ribbentrop. Antonescu once again stressed his country's complete loyalty to the Axis and its willingness 'to enter the new world of the Great Führer-Chancellor' but pointed out the problem of the 'equilibrium of races in Europe'. The ceding of Romanian territories to Hungary and Bulgaria in 1940 and 1941 had, Antonescu argued, destabilized the region and placed Romania at a disadvantage in relation to her neighbours. The General not only put forward Romania's claim to the Serbian Banat once again, but also claimed the Timoc valley region, which lay outside the Serbian Banat and had a Romanian population. The acquisition of these lands, concluded Antonescu, 'would be a recognition of Romania's historic rights and afford the Romanian government a success following all her defeats'.⁸⁶

Antonescu's memorandum of June 11 1941 did not, however, signify the first occasion on which a Romanian claim to the Timoc valley had been put forward. Indeed, the young Antonescu had been an advocate of the incorporation of the Timoc valley, as well as the whole of the Banat, into Greater Romania at that time of the Paris peace conference in 1919.⁸⁷ This region, located in eastern Serbia between the Danube, Timoc and Morava rivers, had a Romanian population of some 160,000 in the immediate post-war era. Although the

⁸⁴ Arh. Nat., Fond Președinția Consiliului de Miniștri, vol. 468/1941, pp. 1–12, 'Situation in the Yugoslav Banat' by Dr Aurel Cosma, Timișoara, May 23 1941.

⁸⁵ Völkl, *Der Westbanat 1941–1944*, pp. 24–26.

⁸⁶ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 83, pp. 16–24, Memorandum sent to von Ribbentrop by General Antonescu on June 11 1941.

⁸⁷ Antonescu, *România*, p. 84.

Romanian delegation at the peace conference had put forward a claim to the Timoc valley, they did not pursue it.⁸⁸ Nevertheless, the region became an object of interest once more on the eve of the German attack on Yugoslavia in April 1941. The Romanian claim to the Timoc valley was implied in the study of April 4 drawn up by the High Command of the army, which had included information regarding its Romanian-speaking population.⁸⁹ Moreover, in his reply to Iuliu Maniu's letter of April 4, Antonescu claimed that Romanian public opinion favoured not only a Romanian occupation of the Serbian Banat but also of the Timoc valley.⁹⁰ Significantly, the Timoc region, just like the Serbian Banat, lay outside the border of inter-war Greater Romania. The claim to both territories was justified on ethnic grounds.

The Ethnic Principle and Romanian Expansionism

Ethnic criteria had long been used to justify Romanian territorial claims by both politicians and historians before and during the First World War and at the subsequent Paris peace conference. In the inter-war period, however, Romanian politicians justified the demarcation of the country's borders by reference to the legality of the Paris peace treaties. By the late 1930s, the validity of the treaties had been undermined by the Anschluß and, especially, the Munich Agreement and subsequent Vienna Award of November 1938, which had partitioned Czechoslovakia along ethnic lines. Romanian politicians now reverted to justifying the Romanian borders on ethnic grounds. Hence in February 1939, the Romanian prime minister Armand Călinescu stated that 'the border of the Romanian state is the border of the Romanian area of settlement. It is not the result of any treaty. It is the product of history and natural rights'.⁹¹ A few months later, the historian and politician, Gheorghe Brătianu, declared that 'Romania is not based on the peace treaties or on the decision of the Great Powers but on the reality of [...] national unity'.⁹²

Increasingly, therefore, the borders of Romania were regarded as being drawn in blood, and not in ink. Furthermore, Romanian politicians correctly perceived that Romania's right to retain her post-First World War borders was more likely to be recognized in Berlin and Rome if the Romanian argument was based on ethnic criteria rather than legal stipulations. Thus, the Romanian government's claim to retain Transylvania in its entirety during the dispute with Hungary in the summer of 1940 was based on the ethnic principle.⁹³ Recourse to the relevant articles of the treaty of Trianon was rejected. In early August 1940, Iuliu Maniu

⁸⁸ Rösler, *Rumänien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg*, p. 465. The Romanian population figure is from 1921. In 1941 the Romanian government claimed that the Romanian population of the Timoc valley was 463,000. See *ibid.*, p. 466. According to R. W. Seton-Watson, writing at the time of the peace conference, the claim for the annexation of the district to Romania 'is advanced by a few irresponsible extremists'. Seton-Watson, *Europe in the Melting Pot*, p. 343.

⁸⁹ Arhivele Militare Române, fond 948/Marele Stat Major, vol. 579, 'A Study of the Jugoslav Banat and Timoc', High Command of the Army, Section 2-a, Information, April 4 1941, pp. 42-56.

⁹⁰ Arh. Nat., Fond Președinția Consiliului de Miniștri: Cabinetul Militar 1940-44, vol. 49/1940, pp. 42-97, Letter from General Antonescu to Iuliu Maniu, Bucharest, June 22 1941.

⁹¹ Armand Călinescu, *Das neue Rumänien. Ergebnisse einer königlichen und nationalen Revolution*, Bucharest, 1939, p. 48.

⁹² Gheorghe Brătianu, 'Rumänien zwischen Deutschland und dem Balkan', *Deutsches Wollen*, April 1939, pp. 9-13 (11). Brătianu was to be a vocal supporter of the annexation of the Serbian Banat in 1941.

⁹³ Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany*, p. 151.

joined with other political leaders in an appeal to Hitler and Mussolini to allow Romania to retain the whole of Transylvania. 'Our borders with Hungary', the appeal stated, 'are not, as some wrongly and tendentiously affirm, a consequence of the treaty of Trianon, which does nothing more than confirm the ethnic realities of the Romanian people.'⁹⁴

Members of the nationalist Legionary movement had never ceased to argue that it was the ethnic principle which justified the borders of the Romanian state and that the country's existence had never depended on the Paris peace treaties. On the contrary, the treaties merely confirmed the Romanians' ethnic and historic rights.⁹⁵ For the Legionaries, ethnic solidarity, and thus potential political union, between the Romanians within and without the political borders of the Romanian state was a given.

The Romanian Legionaries and Yugoslavia

Long-standing Legionary links with nationalist Romanians in the Serbian Banat may well have been an important factor in the growth of public support both in Romania and in the Serbian Banat for the incorporation of the region into the Romanian state. Horia Sima, head of the Legionary movement since the murder of its founder Corneliu Codreanu in 1938, had previously been a regional leader in the Romanian Banat. As a consequence Sima had extensive contacts in the neighbouring Serbian Banat where, from 1938, he had frequently been given succour during the period of the movement's persecution by King Carol. Despite General Antonescu's crushing of the Legionary rebellion in January 1941 and the subsequent dissolution of the National Legionary State, the Serbian Banat remained an important focus of Legionary activity. A Ministry of the Interior report recorded that some 150 Legionaries had received shelter in the Serbian Banat following the January rebellion. Legionary exiles received funding and maintained links with Legionaries still active in Bucharest through a certain Dr Filipescu now living in the capital, but formerly known as Dr Filipovici of the Serbian Banat. The exiled Legionaries also retained links with Romania through Bishop Lăzărescu of Caransebeş in the Romanian Banat and through priests and teachers from the Serbian Banat, most of whom were themselves Legionaries, and regularly travelled to Romania.⁹⁶

In his memoirs, Horia Sima confirmed that following the destruction of Yugoslavia in April 1941 and the disappearance of the Serbian border control, the Romanian-Yugoslav border became an 'unguarded gate'. This allowed the Legionaries in Yugoslavia to enter and leave Romania at will. Moreover, according to Sima, 'the Legionary spirit' had been prevalent amongst the Romanians in the Serbian Banat for many years owing to the commercial and educational links between the two halves of the Banat. The most important Legionary in the Serbian Banat was a certain Pavel Onciu who had established Legionary groups in all the villages with a Romanian population. Onciu had also organized the care and shelter of

⁹⁴ Ioan Scurtu, *Iuliu Maniu. Activitatea politică*, Bucharest, 1995, p. 97.

⁹⁵ See, for example, the ideology of the Legionary Mihail Polihroniade in Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany*, p. 33.

⁹⁶ Arh. Nat., fond/Ministerul de Interne, Diverse 1910-1957, vol. 10/1940, pp. 456-58, undated note, Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei. An earlier Ministry of the Interior report noted considerable Legionary activity in Yugoslavia following the movement's murder of the prime minister Armand Călinescu in September 1939, *ibid.*, vol. 6/1930, pp. 102-04, undated note.

Legionaries in exile following the January 1941 rebellion.⁹⁷ Ominously for the Antonescu regime, the Ministry of the Interior reported that the Legionaries and their supporters believed that a rebellion against the now anti-Legionary Antonescu government would begin in the Banat.⁹⁸ The open Romanian-Yugoslav border and consequent free movement of the Legionaries clearly represented a potential threat to Antonescu's regime. Acquisition of the Serbian Banat would have provided Antonescu not only with an important foreign-policy success, but also the possibility of eradicating a significant outpost of potential Legionary resistance to his regime. Unable to establish Romanian military control over the Serbian Banat, once the Germans had established their administration there, Antonescu requested the deportation of the 150 exiled Legionaries to the Reich. The Germans duly complied.⁹⁹

It seems that Legionary ideology had also established itself amongst the Romanians of the Timoc valley in Serbia where it may well have led to the growing calls for the annexation of the Timoc region to Romania. As early as March 1935, a police report noted that the newly appointed committee members of the 'Timoc Society' were all pro-Legionary.¹⁰⁰ By May 1940, it appears that the Yugoslav police were persecuting the Romanian population in the Timoc region because pro-Axis propaganda was being propagated there by Legionaries.¹⁰¹ The journal *Timocul*, published monthly in Bucharest by the Society of Romanians from the Timoc Valley and Right Bank of the Danube, maintained a constant propaganda campaign from 1934 to 1943 to alert the Romanian government to the 'serbianization' of the Timoc Romanians. The Society also demanded the region's incorporation into Romania in the pages of its journal.¹⁰² The Society's Legionary connections became more evident in the edition published when the Legionary government was in power in the autumn of 1940. In the pages of *Timocul* the Legionaries declared their solidarity with all Romanians living under foreign rule and hoping to be incorporated in Romania. They hailed the Legionary 'martyrs' from the Banat and Timoc who had been murdered by the previous royal regime. These included Ion Belgea, a senior Legionary from the Serbian Banat killed in 1939, and Nistor Popescu from the Timoc region.¹⁰³

The crushing of the Legionaries in January 1941 did nothing to curb *Timocul's* nationalist ardour, or probably its Legionary connections. Following the destruction of Yugoslavia, the journal came out strongly in favour of a Romanian annexation of the Serbian Banat. In an article published on May 1 1941, for example, Nicolae Popp argued the case for Romania's

⁹⁷ Horia Sima, *Prizonieri al puterilor Axei*, Timișoara, 1995, pp. 31–32.

⁹⁸ Arh. Nat., fond/Ministerul de Interne, Diverse 1910–1957, vol. 10/1940, pp. 456–58, undated note, Inspectoratul General al Jandarmeriei.

⁹⁹ Sima, *Prizonieri al puterilor Axei*, p. 32.

¹⁰⁰ Arh. Nat., fond/Direcția Generală a Poliției 1903–1947, vol. 168/1935, p. 33, note no. 1067, Direcțiunea Generală a Poliției, March 13 1935. It is unclear from the note whether the Timoc Society referred to was in the Timoc valley itself, or the society based in Bucharest which published the journal *Timocul*, referred to below.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, vol. 251/1940, p. 183, Corpul Detectivilor Grupa 1–a, nr 20, May 6 1940.

¹⁰² See, for example, in the journal's first issue, 'The Romanians of the Yugoslav Timoc' by M.I., who claimed that at the Paris peace conference the Timoc valley 'should have been annexed by the Romanian Regat', *Timocul. Revistă culturală. Organul Soc. românilor din vale Timocului și dreapta Dunării* (hereafter, *Timocul*), 1, January 1 1934, 1, pp. 20–21 (20).

¹⁰³ Florea Florescu, 'Garde de Fier și Români de peste hotare', *Timocul*, 7, 7–12, July–December 1940, pp. 34–35.

acquisition of the Serbian Banat. Popp claimed this on the grounds that the Romanians were the Banat's original inhabitants whose settlement of the region preceded that of the Serbs and other nationalities. He posited, moreover, that ethnically the Romanians in both the Serbian and Romanian Banat were identical to those who lived in the rest of Romania.¹⁰⁴ In a subsequent edition, Florea Florescu drew attention to the fact that due to 'foreign machinations', the Romanians had been forced to 'sacrifice' Timoc, Transnistria and the Banat. Now, however, it was time to bring the Romanian state's political borders into harmony with its ethnic borders.¹⁰⁵

Conclusion

By 1941, the call for Romanian expansion was becoming increasingly widespread in nationalist circles both inside and outside Romania. Since they had never belonged to the Romanian state, however, the claim to the Serbian Banat and the Timoc region represented the final abandonment of the concept of a Romania based on the legality of the Paris peace treaties. Potential acquisition of these territories was now justified on ethnic grounds, just as Romania's territorial claims had been justified by Romanian decision-makers before the First World War. This meant that, in theory at least, the government could claim the right to any territory inhabited by a Romanian-speaking population.¹⁰⁶ This article has only looked at the Romanian demands for the Serbian Banat and the Timoc valley. It is instructive to note, however, that the government memorandum of April 23 1941 argued not only that 'The Banat is Romanian. Transylvania is Romanian', but also that 'The whole region is Romanian in the Balkans from Timoc [...] to Salonika'.¹⁰⁷ Although the government was not, at this stage, putting forward explicit territorial claims to any region except the Serbian Banat (and the restoration of northern Transylvania), it was making its support for the Romanian-speaking populations of the Balkans very clear. The April 23 memorandum was thus drawn up with a view to creating 'a new Greater Romania' in the future.¹⁰⁸ In his subsequent memorandum to von Ribbentrop of June 11, General Antonescu made an explicit claim to possession of both the Serbian Banat and the Timoc region. He also despatched a number of files for the Führer's perusal that included not only requests from the Romanians of the Serbian Banat and Timoc for incorporation into Romania but also information on the situation of the Macedo-Romanians of the Balkans and the 'aspirations' of the Transnistrian Romanians.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁴ Nicolae M. Popp, 'Românii în Banatul Occidental', *Timocul*, 8, 1941, 1, pp. 1–6.

¹⁰⁵ Florea Florescu, 'Timocul și Transnistria', *Timocul*, 8, 1941, 2, pp. 24–26 (26).

¹⁰⁶ Although most responsible inter-war politicians sought only to protect Romania's territorial integrity up to 1941, historians and ethnographers continued to wage war in print with their Hungarian counterparts on the ethnic composition of the Carpatho-Danubian region, thereby providing 'evidence' for subsequent territorial claims. On this, see Bruce Mitchell, 'Fälschung und Wahrheit: Die Kartographie des Karpathenbeckens im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert und ihre Interpretation angesichts der ungarisch-rumänischen Gegenüberstellung', unpublished PhD dissertation, UEA/Hamburg/Debrecen, 1991.

¹⁰⁷ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 82, pp. 269–76 (272), Memorandum drawn up by Minister Mihai Antonescu and delivered to von Killinger, German Minister, on April 23 1941.

¹⁰⁸ Rotaru, Zodian, Burcin, *Mareșalul Ion Antonescu*, p. 58.

¹⁰⁹ MAE, fond 71/Germania, vol. 83, pp. 16–24, Memorandum sent to von Ribbentrop from General Antonescu, June 11 1941.

This suggested that, given a suitable opportunity, the Romanian government might be disposed to lay claim to other regions of the Balkans and to Transnistria on ethnic grounds.¹¹⁰

Romanian expansionist ambitions were, however, contingent on the successful results of German foreign policy, rather than a direct result of Romanian foreign policy. It seems highly unlikely that the Romanian government would ever have put forward claims to the Serbian Banat or the Timoc region, were it not for the German dismemberment of Yugoslavia. Nevertheless, although Romania's opportunities for expansion were ultimately dependent on the success of the German army, that did not mean that the Romanian government was merely a bystander in the struggle between the Axis and its enemies. On the contrary, the Romanian government was also an actor in the unfolding events and was capable of transforming German policy. Just as Mussolini's adventures brought the Germans into the Balkan military theatre in 1941 in order to safeguard their wider foreign-policy interests, so Romania's problems with its Hungarian neighbour forced Germany into unforeseen changes of policy. It is undoubtedly true that in the 1930s the Reich successfully played on Hungarian and Romanian rivalries in its own interest.¹¹¹ Fears of potential conflict between the two countries, however, compelled Reich leaders to intervene in the Transylvanian dispute in 1940, contrary to their original intention, in order to prevent Soviet intervention on Hungary's side.¹¹² In a similar manner, the strength of Romanian opposition to an Hungarian occupation of the Serbian Banat in April 1941, and the possibility of Romanian military intervention against Hungary, forced the Germans to forestall Hungary's entry into the region. Germany subsequently found itself diverting its military resources into administering a region in which it had absolutely no direct foreign-policy interest. Although they hoped to divest themselves of the region as quickly as possible, German leaders could not find a solution to the Serbian Banat problem that would satisfy both their Romanian and their Hungarian allies. The Germans were thus forced to remain in control of the region until 1944 in what one historian has described as an unsatisfactory 'provisorium perpetuum'.¹¹³

¹¹⁰ In the autumn of 1941, having successfully wrested control of Bessarabia back from the Soviet Union during the German-led invasion, the Romanian army crossed the Dniester river and occupied Transnistria. A number of works was produced during the Romanian occupation justifying a Romanian claim to the area on ethnic grounds. Thus, in 1943, Vasile Netea wrote that 'the Transnistrians are blood of our blood and their soul part of the great soul of Romania'. As it turned out, the Romanian occupation of Transnistria was short-lived and the Romanians were forced to retreat as the fortunes of their German ally waned. For this, see Rebecca Haynes, 'Historical Introduction', in Rebecca Haynes (ed.), *Moldova, Bessarabia, Transnistria* (Occasional Papers in Romanian Studies no. 3), London, 2003, pp. 1–147 (115–16).

¹¹¹ On the dynamics of this triangular relationship, see, Martin Broszat, 'Deutschland-Ungarn-Rumänien. Entwicklung und Grundfaktoren nationalsozialistischer Hegemonial- und Bündnispolitik, 1938–1941', *Historische Zeitschrift*, 206, February 1968, pp. 45–96.

¹¹² On this see Haynes, *Romanian Policy Towards Germany*, pp. 151–58.

¹¹³ Olshausen, *Zwischenspiel auf dem Balkan*, p. 209.