

**JAPAN AND THE POST–WORLD WAR ONE BALANCE OF POWER  
IN EASTERN EUROPE: THE USE OF DIPLOMATIC TOOLS  
IN THE RATIFICATION PROCESS OF THE OCTOBER 1920  
PARIS TREATY ON BESSARABIA\***

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**Abstract**

World War One changed dramatically the political and strategic map of Europe and the world. The Paris Peace Conference (1919–1920) drew the essential features of the new international system with the participation of all the great powers of the winning coalition, Japan included. At the end of the Peace Conference another treaty was signed, on October 28, 1920, still in Paris, with reference to Bessarabia. The signatory parties were, on the one hand, the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Japan, and on the other hand, Romania. The Soviet Russia was not a party to that treaty since the Bolshevik government was not recognized internationally at that time. The October 1920 Paris Treaty did not enter into force because there was one ratification missing, the one of Japan. Different elements prevented the Japanese side to ratify the treaty, and they were related to the very complex relationship the Government in Tokyo developed in the interwar period with Moscow, which in turn had a specific effect on its relationship with Bucharest. Romania acted diplomatically for the Japanese ratification, but was not careful enough to ensure a diplomatic presence in Tokyo and to create a critical mass for its relations with Japan. In the end, Romania lost the diplomatic momentum, by not using the window of opportunity that was before the 1925 Soviet–Japanese convention for establishing diplomatic relations.

**Keywords:** End of World War I; 1920 Paris Treaty on Bessarabia; Soviet–Japanese relations; Soviet actions for Japan’s non-ratification; Romania’s diplomatic failures.

The World War One was a point of inflection for the entire world. At the end of the war, the essential features of the new international system were determined during the Peace Conference held in Paris in 1919–1920 by the great powers of the winning coalition, i.e. US, UK, France, Italy, and Japan. There were five peace treaties, concluded with the countries that lost the war. But not all the problems were resolved by the Conference.

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One set of problems was related to Russia's non-participation in the peace dealings.

Russia was one of the war participants, but after the Communist/Bolshevik *coup d'état* of November 7, 1917, the former Empire of the Czars was crumbling, and was confronted soon afterwards with a civil war. Without international recognition, the Bolshevik Russia did not participate in the 1919–1920 Paris Peace Conference, and that fact left many open and sensitive issues for the post–World War One European security.

### **I. A post–World War One Special Situation. The case of Bessarabia**

The situation of Bessarabia was that type of sensitive issue. Bessarabia belonged for centuries to the princely state of Moldova which was vassal to the Ottoman Empire after mid-16th century. That territory was annexed by Russia in 1812, through a peace treaty signed in Bucharest, at the end of a Russo–Ottoman war. In 19th century the remaining part of Moldova joined another territory, namely Wallachia, in the formation of the national state Romania (1859).

The Romanian state, even prior to its independence, developed different forms of cooperation with its big neighbor, Russia, and the two parties were allied in their 1877–1878 war with the Ottoman Empire. At the end of that war, Romania became an independent state in accordance with the terms of the treaty signed at the 1878 Berlin Peace Congress. In the ensuing decades, Romania and Russia followed different courses in their foreign policies, with the Romanian side coming closer to Austria–Hungary and Germany after 1883, whilst the Russian side allied itself with France and Great Britain after 1891.<sup>1</sup>

During World War One Romania and Russia entered the same alliance, the *Entente*, being the sole countries representing that alliance on the Eastern Front. When Romania joined the Entente camp, in late August 1916, its fate was related to the one of Russia, and therefore any move from Russia had deep impact on Romania.

However, the Bolshevik takeover in Petrograd in November 1917 accelerated the internal dissolution of that Empire, and the new Russian leadership acted swiftly in order to get the country out of war. That is why Romania remained virtually alone on the Eastern Front after the conclusion of the March 1918 Brest Litovsk Peace Treaty between the Central Powers and the Bolshevik Russia. The Romanian state was left with no other choice but to make separate peace with the Central Powers, a treaty in this sense being signed in May 1918 in Bucharest. That was the end of the wartime Romanian–Russian relationship. Romania re-entered the war during the Fall of 1918, following the logic of the “reversal of

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<sup>1</sup> Vlad Georgescu, *The Romanians. A History* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 1991), 140 and the following.

fortune” that was shared by the other Entente powers, remained a part of the winning coalition, and participated afterwards to the Paris Peace Conference.<sup>2</sup>

In what concerns Russia, in the context of the instability that followed the Bolshevik rise to power, some parts of the former Empire chose the path of independence. For instance, Ukrainians formed an independent state, while the Baltic peoples, the Poles, the peoples in the Caucasus and others followed a similar path. In many cases the independence trend was reversed soon afterwards by the Bolsheviks, with the formation in 1922 of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics which claimed all the territories of the former Empire of the Czars.

As far as Bessarabia was concerned, after proclaiming the Moldavian Democratic Republic in December 1917, its legitimate national body, “Sfatul Țării” (National Assembly), decided in Chișinău, on March 27, the unification with Romania. That Bessarabian decision was accepted by the Kingdom of Romania in December 1918, after the end of World War One.<sup>3</sup>

## II. The 1920 political solution: The Paris Treaty on Bessarabia

But that territorial change had important international consequences, because it was the need to have the new eastern border of the Romanian state accepted by the great powers. The solution was the conclusion of a treaty in the last days of the post–World War One Paris Peace Conference.

On October 28, 1920, the *Treaty between the Principal Allied Powers and Romania respecting Bessarabia* was signed in Paris by the United Kingdom, France, Italy, and Romania, while Japan joined the other High Contracting Parties on October 30, through the signature of Viscount Kikujiro Ishii, the Japan ambassador in France.

The treaty stipulated that the signatory parties, noting that “the population of Bessarabia has given proof of its desire to see Bessarabia reunited to Roumania,” declared that “they recognize the sovereignty of Romania over the territory of Bessarabia” (Article 1). In its turn, Romania entered a number of commitments, inter alia “to assure to its inhabitants, without distinction of race, language or religion, the same guarantees of liberty and justice as to the inhabitants of all other territories forming part of the Kingdom of Romania” (Article 3), and to “assume responsibility for the share of the Russian Public Debt and all other

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<sup>2</sup> See our study “Romania and the Reversal of Fortune at the End of the First World War. A View from the Italian Diplomacy,” *Revue Roumaine d’Histoire* 57, no. 1–4 (2018): 59–69. A general view in our book *Relațiile diplomatice româno–italiene în timpul primului război mondial 1914–1918* [*The Romanian–Italian diplomatic relations during the First World War. 1914–1918*] (Bucharest: Paideia Publishing House, 2019).

<sup>3</sup> Keith Hitchins, *Rumania: 1866–1947* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 155 and the following.

financial obligations of the Russian State allotted to Bessarabia, which shall be fixed by a special Convention between the Principal Allied and Associated Powers of the one part, and Romania of the other part” (Article 8).

Furthermore, the signatory parties decided, in Article 9, that they “will invite Russia to adhere to the present Treaty as soon as a Russian Government recognized by them shall be in existence.” In accordance with the same article, the High Contracting Parties undertook to “reserve the right to submit to the arbitration of the Council of the League of Nations all questions which the Russian Government may raise respecting the details of this Treaty, it being understood that the frontiers defined in the present Treaty, as well as the sovereignty of Romania over the territories therein comprised, cannot be called in question.”<sup>4</sup>

The United States, the other great power in the winning coalition, did not participate in that treaty. On June 12, 1920, Secretary of State Bainbridge Colby instructed the US Ambassador in Paris, Hugh C. Wallace that the US Government

“has steadily refused to become involved in discussion of Rumania’s claims in province of Bessarabia, and at meetings of Supreme Council last autumn the attitude of the United States was made entirely clear. At a convenient opportunity, therefore, you should reiterate this Government’s position, and state that the United States must again decline to become a party to any treaty tending to Russia’s dismemberment.”<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, on October 5, 1920, when the treaty was close to signature, Colby strengthened that position by informing Wallace that

“hasty action in this matter would only tend to give the Bolsheviki another pretense for arousing national spirit on the ground that the Allies were disposing of Russian territory at a time when a representative Russian Government could not be heard.”<sup>6</sup>

As for Russia, it was not a participant to the Conference, since the Communist Government was not recognized, and therefore was not yet a party to the treaty. However, soon after the Treaty was signed, the Government of the Russian Republic (as well as the one of the Ukrainian Republic) expressed their refusal. In December 1920, the US Embassy in London informed the Department of State on the declaration issued by Georgii Tchitcherin, People’s Commissary for

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<sup>4</sup> “Treaty between the Principal Allied Powers and Roumania Respecting Bessarabia, signed at Paris, October 28, 1920,” in *Treaty Series*, no. 15 (London: His Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1922); the original French version of this treaty in the Archive of the League of Nations, file R589 – 11868.

<sup>5</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1936), 432.

<sup>6</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920*, 3:433.

Foreign Affairs of the Russian Republic, and Christian Rakovsky, President of the Council of People's Commissaries and People's Commissary for Foreign Affairs of the Ukrainian Republic, that Russia and Ukraine "cannot recognize any transaction as to Bessarabia carried out without their participation as having any force or validity and that they do not consider themselves tied by a treaty concluded between other governments on the subject."<sup>7</sup>

In 1920s the Romanian government did not involve itself in the Russian civil war, a fact acknowledged by Vladimir Ilici Lenin himself. And aside the 1920 treaty, the authorities in Bucharest attempted to settle the Bessarabian nod bilaterally with the Bolshevik government. After diverse diplomatic dealings in 1920–1923, the two sides met in Vienna, on March 27–April 2, 1924. The meeting was a complete failure, the position of the two sides being totally opposed. Soon after the Vienna meeting, the Bolshevik government decided to establish a Moldavian Soviet Socialist Autonomous Republic, inside the Ukraine Soviet Socialist Republic, and the target was to set its western border on river Pruth, which would have meant the inclusion of Bessarabia inside the newly established administrative body.

In the end, Romania ratified the Paris treaty (on May 19, 1922), while the United Kingdom (April 14, 1922), France (April 24, 1924), and Italy (March 8, 1927) acted in the same direction. But the 1920 Paris Treaty on Bessarabia has never entered into force because Japan did not complete its ratification process.

### III. Soviet reactions and Japanese constraints

In fact, in 1920s and then in 1930s, the Soviet Russia (and then the USSR) acted extensively for impeding the entry into force of the October 1920 Paris Treaty. That is why Japan became the target for the Soviet campaign in that respect.

For the Soviet–Japanese relations, a critical point was the negotiation of the January 20, 1925 *Convention embodying basic rules of the relations between Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics*. That bilateral agreement was particularly important for Japan, due to its interests to access Soviet market and resources, not mentioning the aim to develop a friendly relation with the USSR in order to counter the influence of the United States and Great Britain in the Far East.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1920*, 3:434–435.

<sup>8</sup> See in this respect Tetsuya Sakai, "The Soviet Factor in Japanese Foreign Policy. 1923–1937," *Acta Slavica Iaponica*, no. 6 (1988): 27–40. Along the same lines, the contributions of Tomita Takeshi ("Japanese–Russian Relations in the 1920s: Struggles between Anti-Soviet and Pro-Soviet Forces") and Vladimir A. Grinyuk, Yaroslav A. Shulatov, and Anastasia S. Lozhkina ("Soviet–Japanese Relations in the 1920s: from Hostility to Coexistence") that were published in *A History of Russo–Japanese Relations: Over Two Centuries of Cooperation and Competition*, ed. Dmitry V. Streltsov and Shimotomai Nobuo (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2019), 155–178 and 179–197.

According to the Japanese diplomatic archives,<sup>9</sup> on May 1924, the Soviet negotiator, Lev Karakhan, then Soviet Ambassador to China, proposed to the Japanese minister to Peking, Kenkichi Yoshizawa to pursue secret negotiations. That fact was somehow contradicting the Bolshevik commitment to abolish secret diplomacy, as openly expressed in the *Decree on Peace*, issued on November 8, 1917,<sup>10</sup> but it was accepted by the Japanese side. Karakhan proposed then to conclude a comprehensive Soviet–Japanese agreement for establishing friendly relations between the two parties, and the draft proposal of that agreement included the following paragraph:

“The undersigned, the Plenipotentiaries of the Empire of Japan and the U.S.S.R., in proceeding to sign the Basic Agreement relative to the Establishment of Friendly Relations between the Imperial Japanese Government and the Government of the U.S.S.R., hereby severally declare on behalf and in the name of the Empire of Japan and the U.S.S.R. that there exists on the part of their respective Governments no treaty or agreement of military alliance, nor any secret agreement entered into with any third party, which is calculated to infringe upon the sovereignty or territorial rights of or to menace the safety of the other.”<sup>11</sup>

It was obvious that the only contentious point that might have been targeted by that proposal was the 1920 Paris Treaty on Bessarabia, *id est* an agreement entered into by Japan (through signature) and contested by USSR as infringing upon its sovereignty and territorial rights.

As negotiations progressed, on January 9, 1925, therefore just two weeks before the signature of the aforementioned Convention, Karakhan introduced in a message to Yoshizawa the conditionality the Soviet side had in view between the Soviet–Japanese Convention and the 1920 Paris Treaty on Bessarabia:

“I have the honor to bring to Your Excellency’s knowledge that the ratification of the said [Paris] Treaty by Japan could not be construed by my Government otherwise than an unfriendly act.”<sup>12</sup>

Yoshizawa replied the same day, in a confidential note that was supposed to meet the expectations of the Soviet side:

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<sup>9</sup> We had access to the Japanese diplomatic documents (originating in the Archives of the Gaiko Shiryokan, Tokyo [=Gaimusho]) through the studies written by the American specialist in Asian history Bruce Elleman (*International Rivalry and Secret Diplomacy in East Asia, 1896–1950* (Routledge, 2019) and “The 1925 Soviet–Japanese secret agreement on Bessarabia,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 5, no. 2 (1994): 287–295).

<sup>10</sup> The “Decree on Peace” was published on *Izvestiia*, November 9, 1917, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Gaimusho, File 251-106-19, 2315–2338, cited in Elleman, *International Rivalry*, 34.

<sup>12</sup> Gaimusho, File 251-106-5, Document no. 230942, cited in Elleman, *International Rivalry*, 35.

“I beg to inform Your Excellency in accordance with instructions from my Government that they would refrain from recommending to the throne to ratify the said Treaty so long as it is not ratified by all the European signatory Powers, as they deem it to be dealing with a purely European question.”<sup>13</sup>

When the Soviet–Japanese Convention was signed in Beijing, this secret agreement through the exchange of diplomatic notes became part of the Convention, even though it was not included in the public distribution of its text.<sup>14</sup> The content of the notes exchanged is illustrative for the weight the 1920 Treaty on Bessarabia had on the foreign policy of Soviet Union, with considerable impact on its relations with other countries, in this case with Japan. The diplomatic note signed by Karakhan on January 20, 1925 reads as follows:

“On the 28th of October, 1920, five powers, including Japan, signed in Paris a Treaty recognizing the annexation by Romania of the territory of Bessarabia belonging to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.

Taking into consideration the restoration of friendly relations between the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and Japan, my Government trust that the Japanese Government will not proceed to the ratification of the said Treaty, against which the Government of the Union has lodged an energetic protest with the signatory Powers.

Accordingly, under the instructions of my Government, I beg to request Your Excellency to be good enough to acquaint me with the decision of the Government of Japan in this matter for communication to the Government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics.”<sup>15</sup>

The reply note signed by Yoshizawa repeated the earlier commitment by the Government in Tokyo, this time explicitly mentioning the case in point:

“With reference to your letter of the 20th instant on the subject of the Bessarabian Treaty, I beg to inform Your Excellency in accordance with instructions from my Government that unless and until the said Treaty shall have been ratified by all the European signatory Powers, the Japanese Government have no intention of proceeding to the steps required for its ratification, considering that it deals with an essentially European question.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gaimusho, File 251-106-5, Document no. 230943, cited in Elleman, *International Rivalry*, 35.

<sup>14</sup> “Convention embodying basic rules of the relations between Japan and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics,” signed at Peking, January 20, 1925, in *Société des Nations, Recueil des Traités*, vol. 33, no. 866 (1925): 32–52.

<sup>15</sup> Gaimusho, File B760-2, cited in Elleman, “The 1925 Soviet–Japanese secret agreement,” 291.

<sup>16</sup> Gaimusho, File 251-106-5, Document no. 230943, cited in Elleman, “The 1925 Soviet–Japanese secret agreement,” 292.

The Soviet conditionalities were maintained in the years that followed the 1925 Convention, for instance in the case of the revision of the 1907 Japanese–Russian Fisheries Convention, which was related to Japanese specific interests in the Siberian waters.<sup>17</sup> That is a very solid reason why the Japanese government continued to delay the ratification of the 1920 Paris Treaty for the rest of the interwar period. And that position lasted even after March 1927, when Italy ratified the Paris Treaty, thus leaving Japan as the sole non-ratifying power.

#### IV. Romania's Diplomatic Action for Japan's Ratification

However, diplomacy is not a one-way process. Another important reason for Japan's non-action lays with Romania's diplomatic behavior as well.

After the signature of the October 1920 Paris treaty, there were three phases in Romania's demarches in its relations with Japan on the issue of the ratification of the said treaty.

The first phase covers the period until the Italian ratification of the Treaty (March 1927). The Romanian decision makers limited themselves to inquire the Japanese diplomatic agents in Bucharest, in Paris or in other European capitals about the status of their ratification. They did so because there was an institutional situation that can be hardly explained: a Romanian legation in Tokyo was opened in 1917, then it was closed in 1918, partially reopened for few months in 1921–1922 and reestablished again only in April 1927.

In this first phase, the leadership in Bucharest was informed about the Japanese reasons for the delay in the ratification process. The reasons were explained in a letter sent on May 31, 1924 by Japanese ambassador in Paris, Kikujiro Ishii to the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Romania, Ion Gh. Duca, in the following manner:

“The Government of Japan has no objection to the ratification of the Treaty relating to Bessarabia, but as this question is one of the most important in Europe, it is difficult for it to take a decision before all the European Powers directly concerned have given their opinion on the subject.

Moreover, the Imperial Government considers that since the treaty must come into force only after the ratifications of all the signatory Powers have been deposited, the fulfilment of this formality by Japan would not be sufficient to bring about the conclusion of the above-mentioned question.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Elleman, “The 1925 Soviet–Japanese secret agreement,” 292–293.

<sup>18</sup> Fond 71/1914, E2, part 1, volume 24, special folder no. 37, *Ratification by Japan of the Treaty on Bessarabia*, 10, Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania (=Archive MFA Romania) (Letter K. Ishii for I. Gh. Duca, Paris, May 31, 1924).

This explanation coincided with the time of the initial Soviet–Japanese negotiations for the January 1925 Convention, and was worded in similar terms with those used in the afore mentioned Yoshizawa’s reply to Karakhan. In doing so, Japan had in view that not all the European signatory powers completed at that time the ratification procedure – as long as the Italian one was still missing—and therefore tied its own decision with the one expected from Rome.

On the other hand, it is beyond doubt that the Romanian authorities were aware of the secret 1925 Soviet–Japanese agreement about the Bessarabian Treaty ratification. Different diplomatic sources, based mainly on press reports (*Times* of London and *New York Times*), offered sufficient evidence that the subject was dealt with by the Soviet and Japanese negotiators, despite its constant Japanese denial in diplomatic exchanges.<sup>19</sup>

The second phase refers to the period between Italy’s ratification of the Bessarabian Treaty (March 8, 1927) and the establishment of Soviet–Romanian diplomatic relations (June 8, 1934).

Romania’s demarches were done, this time, by its own diplomatic mission in Tokyo, since the Romanian legation in Japan’s capital city was reopened after a decision taken on April 1, 1927. For a decade, the legation had two experienced diplomats as heads of mission: Aurel Vasiliu (1927–1929) and G. G. Stoicescu (1929–1936).

The re-opening of the Romanian diplomatic mission in Tokyo was coincidental somehow with the Italian ratification of the Bessarabian treaty. It was a belated decision, but with a certain effect in the promotion of Romanian–Japanese bilateral relations.

Naturally, the main political issue for the Romanian diplomats along this period remained the Japanese ratification of the 1920 Paris Treaty. After Italy completed its ratification procedure, the Tokyo authorities had no more the argument related to the need to have first the European powers committed to that treaty before a similar decision of its own.

However, the delay in a decision on this issue was the permanent feature of the reaction of the Japanese authorities even after 1927. The Romanian Minister Aurel Vasiliu in his way to Tokyo had a meeting in Paris with the Japanese ambassador K. Ishii, who summarized the reasons for that attitude in few words, namely: a) the difficult financial situation of the population of the Northern Territories, who made their living from fishing and for whose support the Soviet–Japanese fisheries convention was necessary; b) the special state of Japan’s

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<sup>19</sup> The Legation in Washington informed, on January 17, 1925, that *The New York Times* published the day before the draft of the Soviet–Japanese Convention which included the commitment not to ratify the 1920 Paris Treaty. The journal specified that the text of the Convention was confirmed by the Japanese MFA. See fond 71/1914, 13. (Legation Washington, Cable no. 284 of January 17, 1925)

relations with Russia; c) the difficulty of making popular in the Japanese public opinion the question of ratification of that treaty.<sup>20</sup>

The short mandate Vasiliu had in Tokyo was dominated by that kind of approach. When he announced the end of his mission he met with Prime Minister Tanaka Giichi. In conformity with the report written on June 15, 1929 after that farewell meeting, the Japanese dignitary would have motivated his country's reluctance to proceed with the ratification by saying that

“Japan's foreign policy situation today is such that the Japanese Government cannot immediately ratify this treaty, without having decided to do so under the influence of or at the request of someone else”.

He would have added that

“it is very difficult to determine when the Japanese Government would decide – as it is its wish – in a favorable sense, precisely because of that situation about the duration of which it cannot prejudge”.

Tanaka Giichi would have furthermore given assurances that

“Japan respects the international commitments it has made, and it will not be the Japanese Government which will not keep a commitment, or regard a treaty it has signed as a scrap of paper.”<sup>21</sup>

Vasiliu's successor, G. G. Stoicescu renewed the demarches on the ratification issue, and has emphasized in his reports the state of Tokyo's approach to this issue after having had intense and lengthy discussions with various high-level representatives of Japanese diplomacy. In that sense, on November 1929, the Vice Minister for foreign affairs Shigeru Yoshida let Stoicescu understand that Japan wished to keep its commitment to ratification, but was unable at that time to do so because of the many unresolved economic and political issues with Russia. At the same time, when discussing with Kenkichi Yoshizawa about the 1925 Soviet–Japanese Convention, the latter would have admitted that, in his talks with Lev Karakhan back in 1924, the issue of the Bessarabian treaty was raised by the interlocutor, but Yoshizawa avoided disclosing the type of agreement reached at that time. Furthermore, Stoicescu reported that Yoshizawa suggested the conclusion of a Friendship Pact between Romania and Japan, on the rationale that the two countries were

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<sup>20</sup> Fond 71/1914, 51 (Legation Tokyo, Cable no. 55 of August 13, 1927).

<sup>21</sup> Fond 71/1914, 88 (Legation Tokyo, Cable no. 869 of June 15, 1929).

the only monarchies neighboring Russia, and therefore were interested in defending their dynastic principle.<sup>22</sup>

It is interesting enough that, after informing the authorities in Bucharest about the views the Japanese side shared to him, Stoicescu went further in addressing the root causes for the lack of progress in Japanese ratification. On the one hand, he identified the mistake made by closing the Legation in Tokyo in 1922, having in mind that “between 1922 and 1925 diplomatic relations with Russia were not resumed [by Japan] and so in those years, when our presence would have been more necessary than ever, we let the moment pass, without being able to defend our interests effectively, to obtain ratification in time”. On the other hand, he addressed the need to develop the Romanian–Japanese relations in political, but also in economic fields, on the assumption that “by making this country economically interested, we would develop political ties as well.”<sup>23</sup> Stoicescu’s suggestions remained unanswered in Bucharest.

The third phase, covering the period after the recognition by Romania of the Soviet State (1934) and until the June 1940 annexation of Bessarabia by the USSR, looked very much different. Romania practically stopped asking the authorities in Tokyo to ratify the 1920 Paris Treaty, while Japan left in 1933 the League of Nations, which was the organization that had a certain say in the implementation of the Bessarabian treaty.

A particular case was created in 1938, when the ambassador of Japan in Moscow, Mamoru Shigemitsu, raised somehow unexpectedly the issue of a Japanese ratification when he met in February, the outgoing Romanian Minister Edmond Ciuntu, and then in June the newly arrived Minister Nicolae Dianu. Shigemitsu made clear in both occasions that “in case Romania still wanted it, Japan would ratify the Bessarabian treaty without any difficulty.”<sup>24</sup>

The Shigemitsu proposal provoked an in-depth debate in the Romanian MFA, which led to a conclusion that questioned the opportunity of a Japanese ratification at that particular moment. An internal document, intitled “Report on the advisability of an eventual ratification by Japan of the treaty on Bessarabia”, expressed the view that

“At the present time and as long as we maintain acceptable relations with the Soviet Union, the disadvantages of the treaty’s entry into force would outweigh the benefits. For the present, therefore, it would not be appropriate to press the Japanese Government for ratification”.

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<sup>22</sup> Fond 71/1920–1944, *Japan*, volume 12, *Relations with other states. Romania 1925–1944*, 23–26, Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Romania. (Legation Tokyo, Report no. 1194 of December 4, 1929, about „Japan and the issue of Bessarabia”).

<sup>23</sup> Fond 71/1920–1944, 27–28 (Legation Tokyo, Personal Letter of G.G. Vasiliu, December 12, 1929).

<sup>24</sup> Fond 71/1914, 169–173 (Edmond Ciuntu’s Personal report of February 10, 1938) and 174 (Legation Moscow, Report no. 1403 of July 30, 1938).

The analysis added that

“However, if the Japanese government were to let us know formally and directly that it is determined to ratify the treaty, we cannot ask it to refrain from ratification. In such a hypothesis, however, we should ask it to keep its ratification secret and not to deposit the formal act until such time as we shall indicate. We would thus have a means of pressure on the Soviet Union which might prove useful at some point.”<sup>25</sup>

#### V. Towards a conclusion: only the time “solved” the ratification issue.

How accurate that analysis was? The answer arrived very soon: in 1940 the problem related to the Japanese non-ratification of the 1920 Paris Treaty became obsolete. The USSR, after strengthening its international position by means of concluding the August 23, 1939 Nazi–Soviet (Ribbentrop–Molotov) Pact, profited the capitulation of France in June 22, 1940 and forwarded an ultimatum to Romania on June 26, 1940 to return Bessarabia to the Soviet state. After a brief exchange of notes, Romania decided to comply with the USSR’s request.<sup>26</sup>

As the most interested party in the entry into force of the 1920 Paris Treaty, it would have been expected from Romania to use all its tools and capacities in order to motivate the other signatory parties to proceed with the ratification process. It was not the case. The diplomatic absence in Tokyo in 1920s, the lack of direct contacts at the highest level, the very fact that no Romanian minister of Foreign Affairs paid visit to Tokyo in 1920s and 1930s, the poor attention to the development of various forms of cooperation with a faraway country like Japan showed anything but a mature approach in the promotion of national interest.

But more than everything, the Romanian decision makers missed the diplomatic momentum. The early 1920s were a crucial period, perhaps the only window of opportunity in which the ratification would have created no problems for the Japanese authorities. As Nicolae Titulescu, a two times Minister of Foreign Affairs (1927–1928, 1932–1936), and President of the Assembly of the League of Nations (1930–1932), considered later with regret, in a 1940 personal report to King Carol II: “It was ... a mistake made by not asking Japan the ratification at a time when the issue was indifferent for her, or even agreeable.”<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Fond 71/1914, 183–185 (September 2, 1938, *Report on the advisability of an eventual ratification by Japan of the treaty on Bessarabia*).

<sup>26</sup> Dennis Deletant, *Romania 1916–1941. A political history* (Routledge, 2022), 85–101.

<sup>27</sup> Nicolae Titulescu, “Memoriu-Raport trimis regelui Carol al II-lea la începutul anului 1940 referitor la istoricul raporturilor româno-sovietice” [“Memorandum-Report sent to King Carol II at the beginning of 1940 regarding the history of Romanian-Soviet relations”], in *Documente confidențiale [Confidential Documents]*, ed. Nicolae Titulescu (București: Romanian Academy Publishing House, 1992), 93.