

# The War on the Dniester (1992)

# Background and Context

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The War on the Dniester, also known as the Transnistria War or the War for the Independence of the Republic of Moldova, took place from 1 March to 21 July 1992, but tensions between the contested region on the left bank of the Dniester (broadly, what became known as Transnistria) and the Republic of Moldova (known in Soviet times as ‘Moldavia’; officially ‘Moldova’ from 1990) existed long before the military conflict, and still exist to this day.

Between October 1924 and August 1940, the modern territory of Transnistria, along with much of the present-day Podilsk region of Ukraine, was part of the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, which was an autonomous republic of the Ukrainian SSR. In June 1940, the Soviet Union annexed Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina from Romania.

In August 1940, the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic was declared a republic of the Soviet Union. It comprised most of Bessarabia, along with modern Transnistria and its capital Tiraspol. Thus Transnistria effectively moved from Ukraine to Moldavia. While at the time this was a move from one part of the USSR to another, the change acquired new significance when in September 1990, against the backdrop of the USSR’s ongoing collapse, Transnistria, not wishing to be part of an independent Moldova, proclaimed itself a state, and so became one of the former USSR’s unrecognised, breakaway republics.

From the first months after seizing Bessarabia, the Soviet authorities began the Sovietisation of the Moldavian administration. Among the first actions was the arrest of people who had held positions within the Romanian administration, for example, members of the local parliament who had voted for the union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918, and members of Romanian political parties. Most of those arrested were sent to Soviet camps and prisons, and in June 1941, the first wave of organised deportations took place, and around 20,000 Bessarabians were sent to various regions of Siberia and the Kazakh SSR.

After a brief period of German occupation during World War II, the Soviet administration began its collectivisation and planned economy models in earnest after 1945; repression and deportations also continued. After the death of Stalin, and de-Stalinisation under Khrushchev, many people were allowed to return home, but found themselves still limited in their rights and considered ‘enemies of the people’. Young Bessarabians continued to be sent all over the Soviet Union to work in industrial facilities or to join the army and fight, for example during the War in Afghanistan in the 1980s.

Liberalisation of Moldavian society occurred under Gorbachev: *perestroika* and *glasnost* created ripe conditions for nationalist movements which had been suppressed under previous Soviet leaders, and Romanian cultural and historical values were championed once again in the region. Some, however, particularly those on the left bank of

the Dniester, perceived a possible reunion with Romania as a danger. The tension was particularly raised in the late 1980s, when the Latin alphabet was officially adopted in the Moldavian SSR and Moldovan was adopted as the official language. In September 1990, Transnistria declared itself to be a Soviet Republic - as did the region of Gagauzia. Gorbachev made attempts to keep the whole Moldavian SSR together and within the USSR, but his task was complicated by the fact that the USSR itself was now in its death throes.

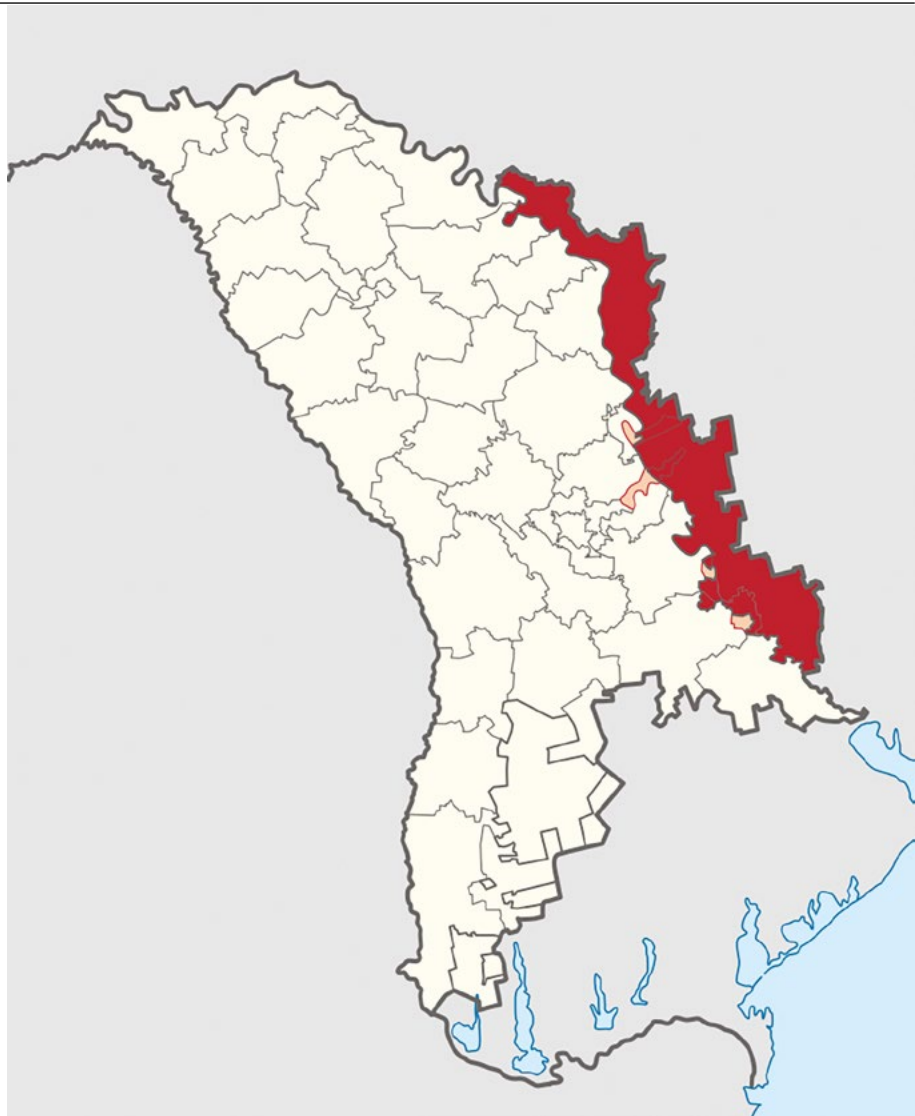
Attempting to keep the USSR together, Gorbachev conceived of the 'New Union Treaty', to be signed by all republics. However, the leadership of the Moldavian SSR at the time, along with other Baltic and Caucasian republics, took no part in drafting the treaty and boycotted the subsequent referendum, held in March 1991 and designed to indicate popular support for the project. Lithuania had already declared its independence from the USSR a year earlier, in March 1990, and this had further encouraged national emancipation movements in other republics. Democratic elections took place in Moldova in early 1991 and, in June, the newly elected Moldovan parliament declared its sovereignty. This act caused parliamentary deputies from the left bank of the Dniester to walk out, as they considered this act too pro-Romanian, or anti-Soviet.

Meanwhile, a dramatic attempt to forcefully maintain the central power of the USSR was made in Moscow in August 1991: this was a failed coup, which was not supported by the majority of the leaders of the Soviet republics, including those in Moldova's capital, Chişinău. The failure of the coup paved the way for Moldova's declaration of independence, which was announced on 27 August 1991.

Consolidating the newly independent state was difficult due to the two separatist regions which were still being supported by Moscow. The Gagauz case was resolved peacefully with the creation of an autonomous region within Moldova, but in Tiraspol, continued narratives of inter-ethnic tensions, Moldova as an aggressor state, and the Romanianisation of the region, meant that the Transnistrian issue developed into a military conflict in the early 1990s. According to Transnistrian historians, Chişinău started the war by attacking the cities of Dubăsari and Bender, where earlier there had been minor clashes between the Moldavian police and the Transnistrian militia (Yakovlev, 1993; Valovoy, 1993; Rudenko, 1995; Babilunga & Bomeshko, 1998, 2005). Other sources maintain that the conflict was provoked by local separatist groups supported by Cossacks from the Russian army. Indisputable is the fact that the separatist forces were supported militarily by the 14th Russian army, which had been stationed there since the Soviet period (Cerba, 2016; Gribincea, 2020). The war caused casualties on both sides of the Dniester, destroyed villages and urban districts, and displaced thousands of people. The hostilities ended with the signing of a ceasefire agreement on 21 July 1992 in Moscow between the president of Moldova, Mircea Snegur, and the president of the Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin.

Although more than 30 years have passed since the signing of this agreement, the war and its resolution remain open topics in society; the war endures in the media, schools, and collective memory (Serebri-an, 2024). Since the end of the military conflict, the Tiraspol administration has built its own government, military, banking, and educational systems, etc. The negotiations for a peaceful solution and territorial reunification with the Republic of Moldova have failed, and the Tiraspol administration still harbours a desire for independence. Russia stated in 1995 that it would withdraw its army and ammunition from Transnistria, but this process is “delayed” indefinitely; appeals from Moldova to Russia at various meetings of the United Nations, Council of Europe, OSCE, and the EU have not changed the situation, despite Transnistria not being recognised on the international stage. Thus, the state of conflict between Chişinău and Tiraspol remains current, and Russia's war against Ukraine has further complicated the situation in the region, exacerbating concerns about Moscow's territorial ambitions in the region.

Map of Moldova and Transnistria (red). Areas in orange are territorially part of Transnistria but under Moldovan governmental jurisdiction. [File:Transnistria in Moldova \(de-facto\) \(semi-secession\).svg](#). Author: TBUS, Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA 3.0, accessed 29 January 2024.



Moldovan society remains divided, both territorially and conceptually. Wars are among the most sensitive and controversial topics in society. Contradictory discourse, hate speech, and mutual accusations are among the elements that define the state of mind in Moldova on the subject of the 1992 war. That said, the topic is not treated sufficiently in schools. Anatol Croitoru, a veteran of the war, says that “Children are taught about all wars, but not about the war for our independence” (Serebrian, 2024). In Transnistria on the other hand, the war is one of the main historical narratives presented in school textbooks (Musteață, 2021).

In the lesson plan presented here, the critical analysis of sources and overall balanced approach aims to promote a better understanding of the events of 1992, as well as tolerance and understanding on both sides of the Dniester. But to achieve this objective, the authorities from Chișinău and Tiraspol must agree on a common curriculum and exclude Russian historical narratives and textbooks from Transnistrian schools, which are the main impediments to the promotion of independent and high-quality education. In the same way, themes that promote the discourse of hatred and mistrust must not be taught. Maintaining the current situation will further hinder the possibility of reunification and the development of a truly democratic society.

Teaching sensitive and controversial topics in a critical way will have a direct impact on the education of the young generation, who will be able to overcome the hate speech currently promoted by the separatist regime in Tiraspol. Quality education means promoting democratic values and the rule of law in schools on both banks of the Dniester, and historical education must play an important role in education for sustainable peace, for the reunification of the state, and for the integration of the Republic of Moldova into the European Union.

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