

Tallinn and Tatarbunary: attempted invasions 90 years ago

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Tallinn is a capital of Estonia situated on the shore of the Gulf of Finland.

Tatarbunary is a city with the population of 10,000 in the Odessa Oblast, in the middle of the historical Budjak area. Budjak is a triangle shaped area in Ukraine and Moldova with Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy (Dniester delta), Bender (Moldova) and Ismail (Danube delta) as its endpoints. Budjak is the south-west tip of Novorossiia. The latter is an area around the northern shore of the Black Sea that was gradually incorporated into Russia as a result of several Russo-Turkish wars starting from the second half of the 18th century.

For us, snobbish Europeans, Tatarbunary is in the middle of nowhere: approximately 100 km from Ismail on the Romanian border, 80 km from Bilhorod-Dnistrovskiy (formerly known as Akkerman) and 180 km from Chisinau, Moldova's capital city. Tatarbunary is located near Sasyk (Kunduk) liman separated by a narrow sandbar from the Black Sea.

Events that occurred in Tatarbunary in September 1924 and in Tallinn in December 1924 were similar. They were and are called an uprising of working people, a rebellion or invasion attempt, depending on the party to the conflict. These events were necessarily similar because they were a part of a grand design aiming to restore the territory of former Tsarist Russia and further expand the territory of Russia, this time under the flag of world revolution. Both invasion attempts failed. In tribute to both events and to perpetuate the Soviet interpretation of history, corresponding monuments were opened on the 50th anniversary of these events in 1974. The monument in Tatarbunary features a traditional Soviet hero; it is still standing.¹ The monument in Tallinn had a more modern style. It was originally placed opposite the railway station and removed to the History Museum in the beginning of 1990s. Nevertheless, *Pribaltika* (as the Baltic states have been called in Russia) was *советский запад* (the Soviet West).

The exact location of the border separating East and West has been debated from ancient times. In our current context the North-South division is more important. In 1924 Tallinn and Tatarbunary were, respectively, the northern and southern tips of *cordone sanitaire*. The strategic vision of the leadership of Russia's Communist (Bolshevik) Party and Komintern is discernible. However, a historian cannot be sure without documents. Agents of Komintern (who, knowingly or not, were in reality agents of the USSR) were then operating in the major part of the known world, and it could simply be a coincidence. History is comprehended on an axis with absolute randomness at one extremity and absolute predetermination (advocated by conspiracy theorists) at the other. The case at hand is no different.

The monuments feature men with a tenacious expression standing in an aggressive fighting stance. The Tatarbunary monument depicts three men and the Tallinn monument depicts four, but one of them is overshadowed by the others, making the monuments even more similar. I don't know about Tatarbunary, but in Tallinn people used to say that the monument features all the four participants in the uprising of 1 December 1924. Of course, there were actually more of them and about a hundred even were later sentenced to death by a court martial; this story simply demonstrates the attitude of common people to the Soviet heroic pseudohistory. An excessive unification,

¹ See attached photos.

a failure to take local situation into account and Goebbelsian lies were major reasons why the Soviet domestic propaganda was so impotent at least for the educated people.

In 1924 Tallinn was the capital of Estonia, a member-state of the League of Nations. Despite two centuries in the Russian Empire and the Russification policy initiated in the late 19th century, the Russian Baltic provinces kept their special status until the collapse of the empire. They had their own local laws, local government organisation, land property system, Protestantism and a lot of influence over local affairs enjoyed by the local nobility.

In 1924 Tatarbunary was a location of no significance on Romania's periphery. Budjak was part of the Principality of Moldavia in the late Middle Ages, and belonged to Turkey from early 16th century. In the aftermath of the 1806-1812 Russo-Turkish war it was transferred to Russia, and in the last period of the Russian Empire it was part of the Bessarabia Governorate divided into Akkerman and Ismail counties. It was a strategically important region allowing control over the Danube delta and connecting the Danube delta with Odessa. After the Russo-Turkish war the Tatars were driven away from Budjak's steppes and replaced with Bulgarian, Moldavian, Polish, Russian, Ukrainian and Gagauz peasants who paid rent to the state. In addition, Budjak was home to many Jews. As a continuation of Novorossiia settlement policy pursued by Catherine II, from November 1813 Alexander I started to invite here German colonists from the Duchy of Warsaw founded by Napoleon. Moreover, in other regions of Germany ravaged by the Napoleonic wars, including Southern Germany, there were also people who saw better future in emigration. In the 1820-1830s Germans moved to this region from Bavaria and Württemberg as well as Switzerland. Emigration from Southern Germany to Budjak mostly took place on river boats via Danube.²

In the 1930s Sasyk liman was mostly encircled by Ukrainian, Russian and Romanian villages; the majority of Tatarbunary's population were Ukrainians and Russians. To the north of Tatarbunary lived Germans; Sarata, one of bigger German centres in the region, was 25 km to the north of Tatarbunary. To the west there was a lot of Bulgarian villages mixed with some Gagauz (an Orthodox Turkic people) settlements.³

The ethnic composition of Budjak bears several similarities to Estonia. First, a sizable German minority. Unlike the Baltic Germans, Budjak's Germans were peasants who became rather prosperous by early 20th century. The German settlers had a special status. The imperial government guaranteed them certain privileges such as local government and release from military service. However, these privileges were mostly cancelled by the end of the 19th century. Similarly to the Baltic Germans, the Bessarabian Germans also left for Germany at Hitler's invitation and on the basis of a secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact. Second, Budjak is also a home to a rather large community of the Russian Old Believers whose ancestors fled Russia from Nikon's church reform in the 17th century. They have preserved their traditions, culture and old-fashioned language up to this day. The Russian Old Believers in Estonia live in villages on the shore of Lake Peipus, while Budjak's Lipovans live in the Danube delta

² For more details see Ute Schmidt, Bessarabien. Deutsche Kolonisten am Schwarzen Meer. Potsdamer bibliothek östliches Europa, Geschichte. Potsdam: Deutsches Kulturforum östliches Europa, 2008.

³ Compoziția etnică a localității Tatarbunar și a împrejurimilor sale în anul 1930, [http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C4%83scoala_de_la_Tatarbunar#mediaviewer/Fi%C8%99ier:Tatarbunar_\(ethnic\).JPG](http://ro.wikipedia.org/wiki/R%C4%83scoala_de_la_Tatarbunar#mediaviewer/Fi%C8%99ier:Tatarbunar_(ethnic).JPG).

and their main occupation is fishing, similarly to the Old Believers in Estonia. Their centers are called Vylkove and Kiliya.

During the 1917 Russian revolution Bessarabia's National Council declared the Moldavian Democratic Republic. However, this state was unable to defend itself and asked Romania for help in 1918. Bessarabia and Budjak were soon incorporated into Romania and the incorporation was recognised in 1919 by the Paris Peace Conference following the end of World War I. The Soviet Russia did not recognise Bessarabia's incorporation into Romania. In June 1940, in accordance with a secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, the USSR forced Romania to cede Bessarabia to the Soviet Union. The Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR) was organised from the northern counties and the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (on the left bank of Dniester, today known as Transnistria) was merged with the new republic. Akkerman and Ismail counties were merged with the Ukrainian SSR.

However, let's return to 1924. Underground Estonian communists as well as agents of Komintern and Red Army's intelligence arm informed the leadership of Komintern and the Russian Communist Party of a "revolutionary situation" in Estonia. The Soviet Russia had recognised Estonia's sovereignty in the Tartu peace treaty.

Concerning Bessarabia, the USSR and Romania conducted negotiations in the spring of 1924. Romania refused to organise a referendum demanded by the USSR. Romania's communist party was banned soon thereafter (summer 1924). Grigory Kotovsky, one of the Red Army's cavalry commanders of Bessarabian origin who was appointed commander of the 2nd cavalry corps deployed on the Romanian border, proposed to overrun Bessarabia by a quick cavalry assault. However, Mikhail Frunze, Red Army's Chief of General Staff, did not support the proposal.

Vasil Kolarov, a Bulgarian communist and a member of Komintern's leadership, and his co-workers planned to organise a communist uprising in Romania that was supposed to start in Bessarabia. The Southern Bessarabia revolutionary committee of Komintern's agents fomented anti-Romanian sentiment among the local population. The causes of discontent were the treatment of national minorities by Romania's central government, the government agricultural policy whose negative aspects were amplified by the summer draught of 1924, and corruption. Although the Romanian-USSR border was heavily guarded, its infiltration by the "little green men" of the day was helped by local geography. It was easy to slip unnoticed into the countless streams and limans in the Danube delta, and then find, agitate and arm local supporters. Infiltrators also came across the Dniester river. In 1921–1924, Romanian authorities registered in Bessarabia over 100 incidents involving firearms.

In the mid-September of 1924 an invasion started on a larger scale. On 15–16 September a small assault unit established control over major institutions in Tatarbunary, raised red banners and proclaimed the Bessarabian Socialist Republic. The Red Army's artillery units simultaneously conducted field exercises in Ovidiopol on the left shore of Dniester. Bolshevik agitators also operated in other villages in Southern Bessarabia. The estimated total number of the invaders and their local supporters was 4,000–6,000 persons.

However, a very diverse ethnic composition of this region became one of the reasons of the invasion's failure. Although subversive activities were effective among Russians, Ukrainians, Bulgarians and Gagauz, the other ethnic groups – Romanians, German peasants and part of Bulgarians – opposed them. In Sarata, head of the Romanian gendarmerie put together a 40-strong unit from German volunteers who stopped the

progress of the invaders. In a short time the Romanian army also arrived and attacked Tatarbunary with artillery support at the dawn of September 18. The invaders retreated and then were destroyed or fled to the USSR. One of their leaders, former factory worker from Saint Petersburg Vassily Surov (aka Andrei Klyushnikov, cover name "Ninin"), fell in the last battle near Galilești village (Desantne from 1944) as was ascertained in the 1960s by local history researchers. According to other data, he was killed in a fire exchange during an accidental encounter with a policeman.

On September 20, Postimees, an Estonian daily, briefly summarized the whole incident: "The Bolshevik gangs who came by a motor boat over the Russian border, invaded Tatarbunary and Nikolayevka villages (in Southern Bessarabia). The authorities and citizens quickly restored order." At that time a lot more attention was turned to the suppression of the August uprising in Georgia, where the Red Army and chekists killed thousands of people.

In the Tatarbunary area the Romanian authorities followed with severe repressions, killing hundreds and arresting about 500 persons. In Estonia the attempted invasion of December 1, 1924 was preceded by the so called "Trial of the 149", while the Tatarbunary Uprising was followed by the "Trial of the 500", in the course of which 85 people, of which not a single person was Romanian, were sentenced to jail. The latter trial was held in Chisinau in August-December of 1925. The Soviet international propaganda attracted a lot of attention to this process and it was condemned by a number of left-wing intellectuals, including Romain Rolland, Theodore Dreiser, Maxim Gorky and George Bernard Shaw. Henri Barbusse described the process in *Les Bourreaux* (The Executioners, 1926).

The Romanian parliament noted the loyalty of the Germans to the authorities during the Tatarbunary events. Romanianization was slowed down and the Germans were promised school education in their mother tongue, freedom of religion and the inviolability of land property rights, and a promise was given to respect the German customs and traditions. In the 1930s Romanianization again intensified, but the history of the Bessarabian Germans soon ended due to *Umsiedlung* following the conclusion of a secret protocol to the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact.

After the failure of the Bessarabian (or Moldavian) Soviet Republic in Tatarbunary, in October 1924 the Moldavian Autonomous Socialist Republic was established on the left shore of Dniester. It was preceded by the establishment of an autonomous oblast in March which is better understood in the context of the 1924 Romanian-USSR negotiations. Today we know this land as Transnistria. For us, a close (in geographical terms) similarity is the establishment of the Karelo-Finnish SSR in 1940 on the basis of the former Karelian Autonomous SSR merged with areas ceded by Finland after the Winter War. In 1956 Nikita Khrushchev again downgraded Karelia to the status of an autonomous republic as a sign of friendly relations with Finland. It happened two years after Khrushchev had merged the Crimean Autonomous SSR (which was a mere oblast of the Russian SFSR after the deportation of the Crimean Tatars) with Ukraine.

What kind of conclusions can we draw from all the aforesaid? Rapidly changing events force us to focus on hot news of the moment without noticing things that are happening elsewhere or have become things of the past. History offers us many parallels both in space and time. The Soviet imperialism championed by the successors to the Russian Empire in the name of all the workers of the world used similar methods in all the border areas of the empire. We can see it in the Tatarbunary events too. Donetsk and

Luhansk people's republics are the brother's grandsons of the Tatarbunary people's republic of 1924. An inability of the Romanian authorities to win hearts and minds of some parts of Budjak's population is similar to the Ukrainian state's difficulties in finding a common ground with the population of Eastern and Southern Ukraine. "Little green men" are just a modern nickname in Ukraine for the tactic of infiltration and use of local population that has been known for a long time. However, it is local people who bear the brunt of the conflict, regardless of the winner. Warlords commanding the "little green men" have always had a lot of names, titles, ranks, official positions and destinies. Some of them have even got into history books as failed romantics.