



Transnistria: last battle of the Red Army, first engagement of the Russian army

The scout

Monsieur Corentin Curtenelle

Published on 13/02/2020

Histoire & stratégie

The conflict in Transnistria, also known as the "Dniester War", is one of the first crises in the post-Soviet space.

While this war is little known in Europe, insofar as it did not benefit from the same media coverage as the war in Yugoslavia, its consequences are not as well known as those of the former Yugoslavia. The Russian Federation has had a major impact, which is why we need to look at the causes of this crisis. At first glance, the Transnistrian conflict could have the appearance of an ethnic war, symptomatic of the emergence of new states, but its origin is much more complex.

Transnistria and Moldova have a recent common history: the two entities were reunited in 1944 under the aegis of the Soviet Union. Transnistria has always found itself at the crossroads of empires, having been successively under Polish, Ottoman and then Russian control, and enjoying very limited autonomy. Conversely, Moldova, also known as "Bessarabia", although it has not enjoyed real sovereignty, has always enjoyed a certain degree of independence. Transnistria, with a majority of Slavs (Ukrainians and Russians) due to a colonisation policy conducted by the Tsars, was favoured by the Soviet Union to the detriment of Bessarabia, which is Romanian-speaking and considered not very 'trustworthy': "If you want to be a minister, you have to be beyond the Dniester," 1 said a popular saying. This is why, on the Moldovan side, this perception of inequality was considered a real injustice by the population. It was only under glasnost (policy of transparency and openness), initiated by Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s, that speech was freed up and Moldovan-speaking Romanian politicians were given the opportunity to take on more responsibility. In fact, the balance of power within Moldovan institutions was changed: Russian speakers were no longer in the majority. A policy aimed at promoting the Romanian language was introduced by these new political leaders, following the example of the law of 30 March 1990 establishing Romanian as an official state language. These tensions, initially political, later led to a civil war that led to the secession of Transnistria from Moldova. Nevertheless, as in all the territories of the former USSR, Soviet

and then Russian units were stationed in Moldova: in the Moldovan case, it was the 14th Army of the Guard. This unit was very active during the conflict and its actions had consequences for all the protagonists, but even more so for the Russian Federation.

Although Transnistria was still Soviet territory, the new Kremlin leadership paid little attention to the ongoing conflict, being too busy managing the deep state crisis that brought the country to its knees. The events in Transdniestria were, however, more important for the army, which, in the midst of restructuring and shocked by the fall of the Soviet Union, saw this conflict as a means of redefining itself. Indeed, the Soviet, and later the Russian, army was truly in tatters during the 1990s. If strategic forces (nuclear arsenal, ballistic missile) had always been the object of great attention from the political authorities, it was indeed to the detriment of conventional forces. Those forces had undergone significant decommissioning, following the defeat in Afghanistan and the financial burden they represented for a political power that wanted to offload part of the defence burden. But the Transdniestrian crisis provided an opportunity for the new Russian army to prove its usefulness.

La Perestroika, lat Glasnost, and the reform of the'armée soviétique

Perestroika (restructuring) and glasnost, reforms initiated by the Secretary General of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union Mikhail Gorbachev, opened a period of liberalisation and democratisation. This "era of the human factor" ², where the individual was to regain his full place within the system, also had consequences for the Red Army.

At the time, the state of the army was already catastrophic, but the Gorbachshean reforms accelerated its decline. The career officer, whose function was once prestigious, now appears to be a disaffected person. In addition to having to hold increasingly recalcitrant troops to military service, in a context where the conditions of exercise are execrable, many soldiers live below the poverty line, and nearly 170,000 officers do not have housing³. In addition to these internal problems, there is also the growing hostility of a population that is becoming increasingly pacifist and anti-militaristic⁴.

⁴ This poor image is accentuated by the return of units stationed outside the Soviet Union. For example, no provision had been made for the families of soldiers projected abroad: of the 300 families of a tank regiment stationed in Hungary and repatriated, only 18 had an apartment when they returned to the USSR.

In 1991, the Soviet army no longer exists and the Russian army is still not created: thus, the general state of the units deteriorates further. In 1992, following the creation of the armed forces of the Russian Federation, almost 80% of the officers were obliged to have a second job in order to support their families⁶.

But this deterioration in the state of the armed forces is not simply the result of a lack of responsiveness on the part of the Soviet and then Russian staffs. Indeed, the declining political class of the declining Soviet Union and the new Russia seems to be completely disinterested in the military fact. The very creation of an army is then subject to debate. However, the conflicts in the post-Soviet area are leading the leaders to reconsider their views on their army.

La Transnistrie : a " petite " war that has façonné thes Russian armed forces

The Transnistrian conflict is symptomatic of the problems faced by the Russian army. In

1992, the 14th ex-Soviet army is still stationed in Moldova, under the control of the Community of Soviet Socialist Republics/Independent States (CIS), the organisation comprising the majority of the states that emerged from the break-up of the Soviet Union. In practice, this unit is autonomous for two reasons. Firstly, given the reform of the armed forces, since in the context of the reorganisation of the Ministry of Defence, the units are left to fend for themselves. Second, because of the origin of the soldiers, since the 14th army is mainly composed of Transnistrian personnel. Thus, the Moldovan aggression is seen as a direct attack on their homes and families.

Transnistria, as well as other conflicts in the post-Soviet space, have generated a change of mentality within the Russian army. First of all, in terms of image, since the conflict in Transnistria is perceived as a victory, allowing officers to "raise their heads"⁷ in a context of political discredit. With a good command, these voluntary and trained units were able to push back, with the help of paramilitary units, a fairly large Moldovan army. This war of the Dniestr is also remarkable inasmuch as it feeds the change of culture of the Russian army, traditionally marked by massive tank manoeuvres and the search for the decisive battle. It allows units to gain experience in so-called modern combat. Transdniestria will be the starting point for the acquisition of extensive experience in the field of counter-insurgency combat⁸, which will not, however, find an echo in Chechnya.

While this new Russian army is immersed in a deep identity crisis, no longer having a real designated threat, the conflict in Transdniestria, as well as other Russian-led "small wars", gives the forces a new mission: to consider the "near abroad" (the former republics forming the USSR) both as a potential conflict zone and as an area of vital interest to Russia. The Russian army's mission is therefore to extinguish conflicts in these territories, an approach endorsed by Boris Yeltsin in 1993 ⁹.

Moreover, in the light of the "Dniester War", the Russian army is beginning to change its doctrine of employment. Indeed, the fighting in Transdniestria shows that the use of heavy armoured vehicles is of little relevance. On the other hand, light vehicles, capable of delivering firepower, protection and transport to the troops, are used on both sides on a massive scale. At the time, Russian units, whose experience in this case was limited to Afghanistan, were not ready for these new types of combat, based on agility.

The Russian General Staff then understood the need for trained, voluntary units capable of rapid intervention. Thus the idea of creating a rapid reaction force was put forward, but it was soon abandoned.¹⁰ In favour of setting up an "immediate action force" based on the units already present in the conflict zones¹¹. The experience of the 14th Army also shows that to stop the fighting, a large amount of firepower is needed to quickly discourage the adversary¹². Another lesson, drawn more from the Afghan case, is based on the idea that politics must consistently support military action. Indeed, many officers believed that the 1988 defeat in Afghanistan was due to a lack of political support for the military. Russian interventions, particularly in the context of peacekeeping, now revolve around the concept of "deterrence through punishment",¹³ based on the power and credibility of the military tool.

Transdniestria has thus triggered a change in the way the Russian army fights. However, this is not its only contribution. Indeed, this conflict prefigures the use by the Kremlin of paramilitary forces in order to defend its interests. Although the Soviet units in Transnistria only intervened actively in June-July 1992, they have been assisting the separatist forces since at least March, giving them armed support and using numerous mercenaries¹⁴. This model of "proxy warfare" was subsequently reused in the various Russian-led conflicts of the 1990s: in the Russian-Georgian war of 2008, with the use of Ossetian separatists, or in Ukraine and Syria, with the use of security and defence service companies such as

"Wagner".

Similarly, while politics seems to be losing interest in the various conflicts that erupt on the borders of the Russia's borders, it was the army that initiated the principle of protecting Russian-speaking minorities abroad after the fall of the USSR. General Lebed, who was sent to command the 14th Army in 1992, thus affirmed this principle many times in his various speeches¹⁵, and set a *de facto* **precedent**: the war in Transnistria can thus be considered as the first conflict where the protection of Russians abroad justifies military intervention.

After almost three years of indecision over the Russian Federation's foreign policy, the Transnistrian conflict and those that followed redefine the priorities of the new state. A consensus is beginning to emerge among political and military elites that Russia should have a proactive role in the post-Soviet territories and that peacekeeping is therefore a tool for the Kremlin to secure its interests¹⁶. In short, Moscow is applying the American "Monroe Doctrine" to the Russian case¹⁷, intending to make **the** former Soviet republics a vital area of interest for Russia. Peacekeepers would henceforth be perceived as pre-positioned forces capable of intervening in those territories in the event of a threat.

The formation of this Russian backyard goes through two stages, as the events in Transdniestria have shown. Firstly, the Russian army must be deployed under the cover of defending an oppressed minority, which creates a risk of a "crisis of confidence". First, the Russian army must be deployed under the guise of defending an oppressed minority, which leads to the destabilisation of the country, as this destabilisation does not allow it to meet the criteria for membership of Western institutions such as NATO. The perpetuation of a presence, in this case through peacekeeping, allows for continued instability, which is beneficial to Russia. In order to promote its position of hegemony in the region, Russia uses "peacekeeping" which happens to be a clever mix between diplomacy and the use of force, as the Transnistrian case proves. Thus, the peacekeeping operation appears as a simple separation of Transnistrian and Moldovan combatants on the ground, similar to UNIFIL in Lebanon. In the background, however, diplomacy plays a very important role. Indeed, where most peacekeeping missions aim to stabilise the local situation so that the central government regains full sovereignty over its territory, Russia, for its part, seeks to strengthen the position of separatists who are in its favour, with Russian forces on the ground acting as a lever of pressure.

The Dniester war was a momentous event for Russia in redefining its role in the world. Protecting its interests in the territories of the former Soviet empire made it possible for Russia to emerge as a regional power, which it had always had to rely on. Together with this redefinition of missions, the conflict was essential for the Russian armed forces and the Russian Federation. The war effectively showed the leaders that although the Cold War was over, local conflicts had not disappeared - quite the contrary.

The soldiers of the 14th Army who fought in Transnistria did so for various personal reasons. The arrival of General Lebed made it possible to offer victory to the Russian forces. However, their efforts were never recognised. Fallen soldiers were considered to have been killed during exercises and were never granted veteran status. However, these forgotten soldiers are important to the Russian Army today: they participated in the last battle of the Soviet Union and the first of the young Russian Army.¹⁸ They were the last to be killed in the Soviet Union and the first of the young Russian Army.¹⁹ They were also the first to be killed in the Soviet Union.

In conclusion

Moscow's strategic priorities have therefore been defined in the light of these conflicts in the post-Soviet space, with Transnistria being the starting point for a new regional policy aimed at maintaining Russian interests in this region. Faced with the expansion of NATO, and later of the European Union, deterrence by force appears to be the best tool available to Moscow to secure its space of influence. While this "stick policy" has more or less borne fruit, its effects must be put into perspective. The military partnerships between Russia and the former Soviet republics are fragile, and NATO's ambitions in Georgia or Central Asia show that Moscow cannot control everything.

Transdniestria's major contribution has therefore been to forge a Russian military and security doctrine. As far as the army is concerned, it has been able to manage a crisis situation, despite its reduced capabilities. Although all the problems are far from having disappeared in 1992, officers such as General Lebed have helped to restore the army's confidence in its ability to protect Russia's interests. Although the post-Soviet conflicts are not all the same, they will have enabled the Russian army to change its structure and the way it fights. The Russian army has thus been able, thanks to Transdniestria but also to other conflicts, to increase its deployment efficiency, the professionalism of its leaders and to prepare itself for modern conflicts. The latter have trained leaders with solid combat experience, who will teach this to the new generations: Such is the case of Vladimir Gurov, a colonel during the peacekeeping operations in Tajikistan and Abkhazia, and now a lecturer at the Military Tactical Institute. This conflict has finally contributed to fuelling an enduring nationalist current among the Russian population¹⁹.

1 Petru Negura, 'Transnistria, origins of a frozen conflict', in Grotius International, 27 October 2011. https://grotius.fr/la-transnistrie-les-origines-dun-conflit-gele/#.W_KgS1OJJPY, accessed 5.10.2018.

2 General Alexei Lizichiev, Course of the XXVII CPSU Congress, Moscow, Moscow Military Publisher, 1986, 112 pages.

3 Thierry Malleret and Murielle Delaporte, Les problèmes de l'armée soviétique : une restructuration indispensable, l'Armée Rouge face à la Perestroïka, Brussels, Complexe Editions, 1991, p. 60.

4 Robert B. Davis, "Perestroïka and Soviet Military personal", The land of Warfare Papers, No. 5, October 1990, pp. 1-29, p. 11.

5 Thierry Malleret and Murielle Delaporte, op. cit. p. 61.

6 Hans-Henning Schröder, "Eine Armee in der Krise: Die russischen Streitkräfte 1992-93. Risikofaktor oder Garant politischer Stabilität?" Report of the Federal Institute for Oriental and International Studies, pp. 1-45.

7 General Alexandre Lebed, Les mémoires d'un soldat, Monaco, Édition du Rocher, 1998, p. 173.

8 Anne.C Adlis and Roger N. McDermott, Russian Military Reform, 1992-2002, Routledge, 2003, p. 189.

9 Boris Yeltsin, Selected speeches of the President of the Russian Federation of 28 February 1993 at the Civic Union conference, the Russian president declares that the cessation of conflicts in this zone is of paramount importance.

10 Russia's means did not permit the creation of such an expeditionary force.

11 Anne C. Adlis and Roger N. McDermott, op.cit., p. 129.

12 Dov Lynch (2003), "Post-Imperial Peacekeeping, Russia in the CIS", Norwegian Institute for Defence Studies, IFS Info 2/03,2003, pp. 1-21, p. 9.

13 Pavel Baev, The Russian Army in a Time of Troubles, Oslo, PRIO, 1996, p. 138.

14 Emmaneul Dreyfus, "Private Military Companies in Russia: What's New in the East?" IRSEM Research Notes, No. 63, 2018, p. 3.

15 Mikhail Suslov, "Russian World" Russia's policy toward its diaspora", IFRI Notes, No. 103, July 2017.

16 Dov Lynch, op.cit, p. 18.

17 Andranik Mygranian, 12 January 1994.

18 Andrei Koslov, 2015.

19 In the 1996 elections, General Lebed came in third place, a sign that the image of the valiant, heroic and incorruptible officer still resonated in the Russian mentality.

Title : Monsieur Corentin Curtenelle

Author (s) : Monsieur Corentin Curtenelle

Release date 28/11/2018
