

How Bessarabians Were Perceived by the Romanian Civilian-Military Administration In 1941

by Diana Dumitru, "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Moldova

ABSTRACT

This chapter delineates the ambivalent perception of Bessarabians by the representatives of the Romanian administration after June 1941. The resentment accumulated by Romanian officials, as a result of loss of Bessarabia to the USSR in 1940, aggregated with the broader fear of the Soviet state, and marked their attitude toward the population of Bessarabia once the province was returned to Romania in the summer of 1941. While the population was still viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation, their mentality and their devotion towards the Romanian state were considered corrupted by the influence of communist ideology and Soviet egalitarian milieu. Correspondingly, Bessarabians were blamed for loosing their sense of being Romanians and the atrophy of sentiments of discipline, respect, and hierarchy under the rule of the Soviet Union. Still, the Bessarabian Romanians were regarded as the most trustworthy social category, compared to other indigenous ethnic groups which, were suspected of anti-Romanian feeling and deemed to share an affinity for the Soviet regime. In the views of Romanian authorities, the Bessarabians could be brought back to normality through a process of "rehabilitation." Until then, the population of Bessarabia could not enjoy the complete trust and had to be administered by devoted elements, predominantly functionaries originating from the Old Kingdom, or verified member of the Bessarabian elites who took refuge to Romania after the Soviet annexation from 1940.

Bessarabia's tumultuous history left an enduring mark on the identity of its inhabitants, presenting tremendous challenges to the numerous authorities that governed this land.¹ Subjected to pronounced cultural fractures and often contradictory overlaying stratifications, Bessarabians' sense of loyalty was constantly under vigilant scrutiny by Russian, Romanian, and other governing powers.² The problem of an assumed lack of loyalty towards the incumbent government of the population of this territory explains the sustained historic efforts to "re-educate" Bessarabians in the civic, national, and moral senses of the word.

The historiography written during the Soviet period excelled at denouncing the "Roma-

nianization" of the Bessarabian population during the territory's period within Greater Romania³ and also advanced arguments supporting the existence of a separate Moldovan national identity, distinct from a Romanian one.⁴ More recently, a series of publications have denounced earlier attempts to manipulate Bessarabians' identity by the Tsarist and Soviet administrations.⁵ After 1991, the Re-

3 S. K. Brysiakin, *Kul'tura Bessarabii v 1918-1940 gg*, Kishinev, 1978; S. K. Brysiakin, M. K. Sytnik, *Torzhestvo istoricheskoi spravedlivosti*, Kishinev, 1969; A. Dolinik, *Pod vlastiu rumynskikh boiar*, Moskva, 1945; V. Lungu, *Politika terora i grabezha v Bessarabii (1918-1920 gg)*, Kishinev, 1979; S. F. Kustriabova, *Polozhenie trudniashkhsia i demograficheskie protsessy v gorodakh Bessarabii (1918-1940)*, Kishinev, 1977.

4 A. M. Lazarev, *Moldavskaia sovetskaia gosudarstvennost' i bessarabskii vopros*, Kishinev, 1974; *Împotriva falsificatorilor burgheji ai istoriei și culturii poporului moldovenesc*, Chișinău, 1974; V. Stati, *Limba moldovenească și răuvoitorii ei: împotriva falsificatorilor burgheji ai dezvoltării limbii moldovenești*, Chișinău, 1988.

5 Mihail Bruhis, *Rusia, România și Basarabia (1812, 1918, 1924, 1940)*, Chișinău, 1992; W. P.

1 A series of articles on the issue of Bessarabian identity can be found in: *Basarabia. Dilemele identității*, eds. Flavius Solomon, Alexandru Zub, Iași: Fundația Academică „A.D. Xenopol,” 2001.

2 George Ciorănescu, *Bessarabia, Disputed Land between East and West*, Muenchen, 1984.

public of Moldova became a battleground of opposing political forces, while historiography and education became tools for shaping the population's identity towards various desired outcomes (typically a pro-Russian or pro-Romanian direction).⁶

This chapter does not claim to include debates on these topics, nor does it intend to provide historical or political arguments for either side involved in shaping Bessarabians' identity. It has a more modest aim: to analyse the multiple facets of how Bessarabians were described in 1941 by members of the Romanian administration. The rationale for analysing the imagery of Bessarabians from this specific vantage point follows from the exceptional nature of the circumstances under which it arose. The analysis should help scholars better understand overlapping national and regional identities, centre-periphery relations, and challenges to the sense of belonging which permeated Romania, Bessarabia, and much of Europe during

van Meurs, *The Bessarabian Question in Communist Historiography. Nationalist and Communist Politics and History Writing*, Chişinău, Arc, 1996; Charles King, *Moldovenii. România, Rusia și politica culturală*, Chişinău, Arc, 2002; Klaus Heitmann, *Limbă și politică în Republica Moldova*, Chişinău, 1998; Doru Mihăiescu, *Basarabia și Bucovina (pornind de la numele lor)*, Iași, 2000.

6 Mircea Snegur, "Republica Moldova este țara tuturor cetățenilor săi," in *Pământ și oameni*, 12 February, 1994, p. 3, Mihai Cimpoi, *Basarabia sub steaua exilului*, București, 1994; Anatol Petrencu, *În serviciul zeiței Clio*, Chişinău, 2001; Ion Eremia, *Falsificarea istoriei sau "Fenomenul Stati" în Republica Moldova*, Chişinău, 2003. For an account on the confrontations in Moldova's schools see the articles: Elizabeth Anderson: "Don't Falsify Our History! Moldovan Teacher and Student Reaction to State Proposed History Courses", *Nationalisms Across the Globe: An Overview of Nationalisms in State-Endowed and Stateless Nations*, Vol. I, Europe, Poznan, The Polish Academy of Sciences, 2005; Anderson Elizabeth A., "Backwards, Forwards, or Both? Moldovan Teachers' Relationship to the State and the Nation," *European Education*, 2005, vol. 37, nr. 3, p. 53-67.

this extraordinary period of time, and thereby elucidate a topic which has so far failed to attract much scholarly attention.⁷

Notably, the year 1941 represents a crucial period – one of maximal intensity in the history of the Romanian state – and yet a watershed juncture that is significantly understudied in Romanian historiography, especially when compared to the focus placed on 1940. With the beginning of the war with the USSR, the leadership of Romania was undertaking a reappraisal of earlier phases of history and, simultaneously, launched several projects of great significance for the future of the entire country and of Bessarabia in particular. During this period, the state's border on the Nistru River was once again imbued with importance as its defensive eastern frontier and the bastion of Christendom in the fatal vicinity of Soviet Russia.⁸ Resentments which had burst forth among the Romanian administration after the surrender of Bessarabia in June 1940, helped determine the nature of national projects focused on the Bessarabian population after the territory's return to Romanian rule. In this particular context, the way in which the Bessarabian population was viewed by the central administration laid the foundation for implementing a new social construction, and, simultaneously, established the place and the definitive role

7 The author of this article studies the issue of the Holocaust in Romania; most of the archival materials cited here were consulted in relation to the study of the Holocaust.

8 The Romanian government will also ponder claims on the Soviet territory across Nistru River and with the help of its political and intellectual elites will attempt to justify a new political border on the Bug River. See: Mioara Anton, "Dincolo de Nistru. Politică etnică și construcție identitară," *Al doilea război mondial: memorie și istorie în estul și Vestul Europei*, eds. Diana Dumitru, Igor Cași, Andrei Cușco, Petru Negură (Chişinău: Cartier, 2013), p. 25-44.

of Bessarabians inside Romanian society. The aim of this study is to highlight the image of Bessarabians as perceived by the Romanian administration starting from June 1941 until the end of that year. In order to achieve this goal we analyse a series of archival documents containing references to the civilian population of Bessarabia, most of which had been subjected to Soviet occupation between June 1940 and June 1941, by representatives of the civilian and military administration of Bessarabia, including the governor of the province. The majority of materials used for this research originates from the archives of the Ministry of National Defence of Romania and from the National Archives of the Republic of Moldova, as well as some regional archives in Ukraine.⁹ Among Romania's historical regions, cultural, ethnic, and other differences have always existed. Because of these differences, no large regional administrative units were ever created, as the central authorities in Bucharest clearly aimed to avoid the strengthening of significant regional identities.¹⁰ However, one can notice that, during the period studied here, a system was installed in Bessarabia which differed radically from the situation in the rest of the country. This was clearly on display when Marshall Ion Antonescu appointed General Constantin Voiculescu as governor of Bessarabia: he was accountable only to the Marshall himself and was given special prerogatives, including the right to annul the country's laws

9 These materials were studied at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (further USHMM), which holds an important collection of documents—especially related to WWII period—originating from various European archives.

10 For a thorough analysis of regionalist movements and the efforts of national building in Greater Romania see the study of Irina Livezeanu, *Cultural Politics in Greater Romania: Nationalism, Nation Building, and Ethnic Struggle, 1918-1930*, Princeton: Cornell University Press, 1995.

within Bessarabia whenever it served the national interest.¹¹

The circulation of goods and people between Bessarabia and the rest of Romania was considerably curtailed, with the intention of erecting an impenetrable wall between the two parts of the reunited country.¹² From the first days of the war with the USSR, Antonescu demanded that qualified, competent civil servants be employed in Bessarabia and Bucovina. In order to encourage functionaries to arrive and work in these peripheral provinces a 30 percent rise in salaries was planned, in addition to the establishment of exclusive shops that would provide access to goods which were in short supply.¹³ The government and military functionaries from the Romanian Old Kingdom¹⁴ brought their preconceived notions about Bessarabians to their new assignments. At the heart of their attitudes lay anxiety over the possible duplicity of this population and the consequences of its "Bolshevisation" under the previous regime. Doubts over the Bessarabians' political reliability reflected a broader concern that permeated Romanian society at that time.

A number of factors contributed to the creation and diffusion of this particular image of Bessarabians, which is present through-

11 Anatol Petrencu, *Basarabia în al doilea război mondial, 1940-1944*, Chişinău: Lyceum, 1997, p. 245; *Stenogramele şedinţelor Consiliului de Miniştri: guvernarea lui Ion Antonescu. 5 octombrie 1941-ianuarie 1942*, Vol. V, Bucureşti, Arhivele Naţionale ale României, 2001, p. 442-444.

12 *Stenogramele şedinţelor Consiliului de Miniştri: guvernarea lui Ion Antonescu. 3 aprilie-iunie 1941*, Bucureşti, 1999, p. 597; *ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 200.

13 *Stenogramele...*, Vol. III, p. 645; *ibid.*, Vol. IV, p. 566, p. 601, p. 607; *ibid.*, Vol. VI, p. 456.

14 The term Romanian Old Kingdom, or Old Kingdom [Regatul Vechi] was used when referring to the territory covered by the first independent Romanian nation state before 1918.

out the archival documentation produced in 1941. In the majority of these documents, the Bessarabian population is examined through the prism of loyalty, identifying the degree of faithfulness it showed towards the reestablished Romanian authority. This question of loyalty should not, however, overshadow the fact that, without question, Bessarabians were regarded by the Romanian administration as part of the Romanian nation, as compatriots of their brothers living across Prut River. This viewpoint was deemed to be an uncontested truth. Because of this nationalistic approach, in the majority of documents, ethnic Romanians from Bessarabia were singled out and judged separately from other ethnic groups inhabiting the same territory. The documents which examined the state of the “Romanian spirit” within Bessarabia emphasised that Romanians from Bessarabia in particular demonstrated an overwhelming “joy” at the restoration of Romanian authority:

“In all localities across the Prut River, where our units passed, the Romanian population received with great joy and heartfelt gratitude both the Romanian and German armies. While passing through villages, the units were received with flowers and celebratory cheers. On every face one could see jubilation over their salvaging from the Russian yoke... The Romanian population received the entrance of Romanian troops into Bessarabia as a boon and with emphatic enthusiasm.”¹⁵

One note issued by the 3rd Army reinforcements expresses in beaming, propagandistic language an opinion pre-

15 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence [Arhivele Ministerului Apărării Naționale], Fund „3rd Army”, Inv. nr. S/6776, reel nr. 352; Report of the Section 2 of the 3rd Army from July 8, 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

dominant in Romanian military circles:

„We cannot fail to notice the pride and satisfaction of the Romanian soldier who not only set free our brothers from Bucovina and Bessarabia, but through his sacrifice stuck the Romanian tricolor [national flag] faraway, on Ukrainian lands, which were possessed until recently by the Communist octopus, which for over 22 years boasted that any enemy will be destroyed on its own land.”¹⁶

Other informative documents confirmed with resolution that “sentiments of loyalty and profound trust in the new spirit of the time and joy over the reunification of Bessarabia with the Motherland can be read on everybody’s face.”¹⁷ Occasionally, documents of representatives of the Romanian administration betray a paternalistic attitude blended with a degree of condescension. For example, a report of the 3rd Army portrays Romanian soldiers as “Crusaders who went to sacrifice themselves for the faith in God and in church disgraced by the Judeo-Communists.” According to this report, one Bessarabian [presumably an ethnic Romanian] addressed these soldiers with the following words: “you took away the yoke that was upon us, now give us some intelligence [ne-ați luat jugul, dați-ne minte].”¹⁸

In this context, it is revealing that residents of Bessarabia who were of non-Romanian ethnic origin were perceived as being hostile—or in the best case indifferent—towards the Roma-

16 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „3rd Army”. Inv. S/6776, reel 352, f. 133, Informative note from August 12, 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

17 Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Odesskoi Oblasti [further GAOO], Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, Informative note from August 31, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

18 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „3rd Army”. Inv. S/6776, reel nr. 352, f. 133, 12 august 1941; USHMM, RG-25.003, reel 18.

nian administration.¹⁹ According to an informative note, the population of Ukrainian origin “to a certain extent, showed indifference towards the new situation. They do not allow expressions of either good or bad perceptions over the reoccupation of Bessarabia by our troops [Nu lasă a se înțelege nici în bine, nici în rău, reocuparea de către trupele noastre a Basarabiei].²⁰” The ethnic Russian population was regarded as unfriendly towards the new government, being regarded as sympathisers of Soviet power. Correspondingly, on 14 September 1941, Ion Antonescu sent an order to the governor of Bessarabia Voiculescu asking him to treat “all those of Russian origin and all those who served under the Bolsheviks” with suspicion.²¹

Alongside the implementation of a forceful policy of Romanianisation which involved ethnic-Romanian residents of Bessarabia being viewed as an integral part of the Romanian national “body,” archival documents also display sentiments of another sort. These sentiments indicated a traumatic experience as a result of territorial loss and the humiliation suffered by representatives of the Romanian state during the summer of 1940. The fact that some Bessarabians openly showed satisfaction with the incorporation of their province into the Soviet Union, or the fact that most decided to remain in the territory after Soviet occupation deeply injured the pride of Roma-

nian dignitaries, especially in a period when the ethnocentric aspirations of the Romanian state were reaching their apex. Immediately after the Soviets reconquered the province, this political acrimony led to a certain disqualification of the inhabitants of Bessarabia in the eyes of Romanian functionaries. A report from the gendarmerie legion in Chișinău mentions that during the period of withdrawal of Romanian troops from Bessarabia “this population has lost the least Romanian sentiment, blended into the Bolshevik hordes and local minorities, and started the plunder against the army and functionaries.”²²

The resentment accumulated by Romanian officials as a result of the events of June 1940 was frequently enhanced by their broader fear of the Soviet state and the combination marked their attitude towards the population of Bessarabia once the province was returned to Romania in 1941. The contact of Bessarabians with the Soviet regime between 1940 and 1941 was regarded as baleful and, at times, was rendered in graphic religious terms. Bessarabians’ choice not to oppose the incorporation of their province into the Soviet state, for example, was likened by Romanian authorities to the denial of God and to moving to the side of Satan.²³ Along with the assumed apostasy of the Bessarabian population under the Soviet regime, anti-Romanian sentiment was deemed to have reached its climax at that time. One gendarmerie report insisted that during this period Bessarabians “mostly lost their feeling of being Romanian” and proceeded to take action against the Romanian state:

“Many of them indulged in acts of espionage, treason, and bringing Soviet troops to our po-

19 During the summer and fall of the year 1941 there were executions and mass deportations of Bessarabian Jews. The documents produced by the administration abound in accusation of Jews and their intentions to destabilize the situation inside the country and to sabotage the Romanian leadership.

20 *Ibid.*

21 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet”, Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, p. 533; USHMM, RG-25.003M, reel 121.

22 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941; USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6.

23 *Ibid.*

sitions during operations, culminating in the fact that some of them volunteered to fight against us while in the ranks of the Red Army, caught our agents and surrendered them to the Soviet authorities who executed them.”²⁴

Curiously, even if he had “moved on the side of Satan,” the Bessarabian was not seen as an active collaborator with Soviet power, but rather as a passive object in its hands. The Bessarabian in whose soul “the communist propaganda took root” appears as wimpish, opportunistic, incapable of a judicious analysis of the situation which had been created. The calculations of these Bessarabians was understood as being “bitter and wrong,” because they “did not wait for the results of the future and the outcome which gave birth to their salvation from the Bolsheviks’ clutches.” Moreover, according to the same document, even those Bessarabians who spied on the Romanian state and helped the Soviets are partially exonerated by the affirmation that they did this “in an unfortunate act of unconscious communist motivation [print-un nenorocit act de inconștientă cauză comunistă].”²⁵

Nevertheless, the Bessarabian population’s contact with the Soviet state was not always described as harmful for the mindset of Bessarabians and for the Romanian spirit in the region. Some Romanian functionaries and militaries shared the opinion that the affiliation of Bessarabians with the Soviet regime decreased substantively after one year of being part of the Soviet state, primarily because of the terror exercised by the Soviet secret police, in addition to material shortages suffered during this period. A counter-informa-

tive bulletin of the regional inspectorate of the Chișinău police, for example, claimed that:

“one year of Soviet occupation produced serious dissatisfaction among the population of cities and villages. Even the biggest sympathisers of the communist movement remained disappointed. For all social categories, the standard of life during the Soviet occupation was lower than the Romanian one.”²⁶

The chief of Cetatea Albă police office Venculescu and the head of Siguranța²⁷ bureau Petre Teodorescu repeated these words almost verbatim and, in addition, emphasised that:

„the actions against religion led by the Jews, the severe regime which was imposed upon agricultural workers, peasants who accepted to enter Collective farms and who had to provide a prescribed output during working hours, one demanded by the Soviet authorities, and the taxes in cash and in kind which were supposed to be paid by the rural population to the state, and especially those who did not enter Collective farms produced the biggest dissatisfaction.”²⁸

The gendarmery also noted that Bessarabian peasants rated the activity of the Soviet police as much more efficient than that of the Romanian security apparatus. One of them observed that:

“it was sufficient to have one militia man for a plasa [administrative unit] in order to keep the entire order, security, and the execution of orders under control, while in the case of the Romanians [gov-

24 *Ibid.*

25 USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6, General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941.

26 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, August 10-20, 1941; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

27 Siguranța/Siguranța Statului was the term used when referring to various installments of secret police in interwar and WWII Romania.

28 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

ernment], because of favouritism and corruption in the service, the population does not execute all the dispositions given by the Administration on time."²⁹

According to claims by the Bessarabian statesman and politician Vladimir Cristi, the Bessarabian people, and especially the rural population, were "undeniably satisfied to get rid of the yoke and tyranny of Bolshevism owing to the Romanian soldier and the wiseness of its Conducător [leader]."³⁰ Furthermore, the politician underlined that if the Romanian administration failed to secure Bessarabians' affection and loyalty during the interwar period, then the Bolshevik regime, through its policies and the quality of life enforced upon the population in 1940-1941, moved Bessarabians closer towards Romania. Cristi expressed a daring opinion, asserting that "during one year of Bolshevik rule, Bessarabia was more romanianised than during the 22 years of our [Romanian] domination."³¹

Even reports which harshly criticised the conversion of Bessarabians to communism admitted that a number of Bessarabians remained loyal to the Romanian state and "breathed a sigh of relief" when the Romanians entered and "brought praise to God for being rescued from the Bolshevik regime which sought their destruction." Even those who were not deemed loyal to the Romanian administration, and who were not expected to regard the reinstallation of its regime with kindness, were nevertheless reported to not be "demonstrating [such feelings] in any form, because of the fear of new rigours of laws, and [they] seek to

29 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941, November 12, 1941; USHMM, RG 25.010M, reel 9.

30 Cabinetul Civilo-Militar pentru Administrarea Basarabiei, Bucovinei și Transnistriei, Arhiva Națională a Republicii Moldova, Fund nr. 706, inv. 1, dos. 10, f. 16; USHMM, CBBT, reel 2.

31 *Ibid.*

rehabilitate themselves through various acts of obedience and through the loyalty they display."³² More rarely, the locals were attributed a reserved attitude towards the Romanian administration. An informative note sent in September 1941 from the district of Ismail characterised the Bessarabian population as being "in a state of undetermined opinion," a state excused through the fact that this population is "living in permanent fear."³³

The ambiguous attitude of the Romanian authorities can also be explained by the fact that the resentments built up in the recent past were colliding with crucial necessities of their present. If the past was demanding the punishment of "collaborators" with Soviet power and the revenge of the Romanian state, then the interests of present and future were surfacing the necessity to stabilise political power and to find reconciliation with the local population of the region. The discourse of those functionaries from the Old Kingdom who had arrived in order to manage the reconquered province is clearly influenced by this dilemma, since many of them attempt to simultaneously condemn and justify the behaviour of Bessarabians between 1940 and 1941. A report of the Siguranța bureau from Cetatea Albă accounted for the behaviour of Bessarabians who had evacuated further east within the USSR in accordance with the Soviet authorities during the retaking of Bessarabia by Romania in the summer of 1941 by the fact that the majority of the people that had crossed over the Nistru River "were either taken through a government order or through mobilisation as part of the army or auxiliary formations, or were

32 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941; USHMM, RG-25.010M, reel 6.

33 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 397, September 1941; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

obliged to leave along with the factories in which they worked, as part of the Bolsheviks' general mobilisation plan."³⁴ On the other hand, according to the same document, part of the population which had arrived in Bessarabia from the Old Kingdom after 28 June 1940 came back in order to take their families, while pupils and students, among others, returned to their parents' place of residence.³⁵ Clearly, the people who left Romania after 28 June 1940 in order to go to Bessarabia and the relatives of those Bessarabians who evacuated with the Soviets in June-July 1941 were worried about potential punishment by the newly installed Romanian authorities. Correspondingly, the authors of the document report to their superiors that

"the categories of the inhabitants listed above hope that the Government and the understanding leadership of Mr. Marshall Antonescu will equitably regulate the situation of citizenship through future measures and regulations."³⁶

An important document, signed in September 1941 by the governor of Bessarabia, general Voiculescu, and sent to all departments, prefectures, town halls, the Inspectorate of the Gendarmery and the Inspectorate of Politics and its divisions, illustrates in an expressive manner the unsettling qualities of Bessarabians, as perceived by the administration of the province.³⁷ In its opening paragraph, the governor's communiqué states trenchantly

34 GAOO, Fund 2248, op.1, ed. hr. 23, the report covers the period from November 6 to December 6, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

35 *Ibid.*

36 *Ibid.*

37 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 306; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

that "one year of Soviet rule was sufficient to atrophy among many Bessarabians any sentiment of discipline, respect, and hierarchy." Seemingly, Voiculescu was irritated by the particular changes imposed by the Soviet power which, in his understanding, led to the dismantling of the hierarchic system, considered to be a constitutive element of Romanian society of that era. The governor of Bessarabia harshly criticised "that 'camaraderie' which aimed at the levelling of social classes replaced the rooted conventional forms to address only with 'you' [singular form], which created the illusion of equality with those situated on the lowest levels of society." For Voiculescu, favouring the lower class or "those without a sense in life [a celor fără nici un căpătâiu]" was equivalent to their transformation in a "category noncompliant to any order, discipline and hierarchy." At the same time, people belonging to superior classes were supposedly lowered, through this "equality," imposing a kind of "inferiority complex on them."³⁸

Voiculescu was indignant at the atmosphere of "egalitarianism" which in his opinion was reigning in Bessarabian institutions and organisations where local functionaries were working. According to the governor's point of view,

"an attentive observer would be surprised by the lack of deference which is owed by the little ones towards those situated on a higher hierarchical level. We do not even mention the manner and the bearing of many citizens when they address an authority; ostensibly [they] have something commanding, - "something" which the person who lived in the Old Kingdom is not used to."³⁹

38 *Ibid.*

39 *Ibid.*

This statement is supported by several examples. Among these is the case of the engineer Vasenco from the technical service of the prefecture of Bălți who, as is stressed in the document, “remained under the Soviets.” We learn that while Vasenco left his office, his courier arrived, also someone who “remained under the Soviets,” and sat on the chair of his boss, the engineer Vasenco. Voiculescu thought it scandalous that at the return of Vasenco, the courier did not stand up from Vasenco’s chair; moreover, “the engineer also did not find this deed abnormal,” but “took another chair and sat beside him.” A similar example brought up by the governor refers to the director of the Theological Seminary of Chişinău who, according to several statements, “throughout the occupation enjoyed spending time with the school’s servant staff.” Finally, the author of the document concludes that “[these] are small examples, insignificant, but they illustrate a certain state of affairs, a certain mentality.”⁴⁰

In his directive, Voiculescu explained these occurrences as a result of the fact that under the Soviet occupation neither functionaries nor professors had any authority over citizens and students; that these elite positions lost all prestige. A series of measures was meant to correct the prevailing situation. For example, the entire administrative personnel, professors, teachers, and local functionaries from Bessarabia were allowed back into government service following a verification procedure, and were sent across the Prut River (to the Old Kingdom), or “at least in another location far away from the ones where they served under the Soviet regime.” The freed-up positions were meant to be filled “primarily by the elements from the Old Kingdom and Bessarabian refugees, [who should be] double-checked, who at the evacu-

ation [of the Romanian authorities in 1940] left across the Prut.” Finally, the governor forcefully demanded that “every chief of every category or level [should] watch over the reestablishment of the idea of discipline, respect, and hierarchy, intervening energetically each and every time this will suffer.”⁴¹

As we can observe, in the perceptions of Romanian authorities, the Bessarabians were in a way “contaminated” by their contact with the communist regime and they could be brought back to normality through the application of a set of special measures. Until then, the civilian population of Bessarabia could not enjoy complete trust and had to be administered by devoted elements, predominantly functionaries originating from the Old Kingdom. Correspondingly, localities of Bessarabia which were administered by natives of the Old Kingdom had the highest chance to be perceived as trustworthy sites. A summary of the information compiled by the Siguranța bureau from Cetatea Albă notified its superiors that the Romanian population of the city was made up exclusively of functionaries, professors, teachers, and officers who came for service in this locality from the Old Kingdom, in addition to several indigenous families. According to this document, the spirit of the population from the city “is not unsatisfactory in any aspect;” the Romanians from here are demonstrating “the utmost confidence in the incumbent leadership of the state and comment favourably on all measures of order which are undertaken and the activity which is conducted for the restoration and rebuilding of Bessarabia.”⁴²

41 The Archives of the Ministry of National Defence, Fund „Government of Bessarabia Military Cabinet,” Inv. S/19845, reel nr. 651, f. 306; USHMM, RG -25.003M, reel 121.

42 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, the report from September 19 to October 19, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

40 *Ibid.*

Yet, the publicly expressed derogatory attitude of Old Kingdom functionaries towards Bessarabians sometimes provoked conflict situations, such as those reported by the gendarmerie office of the village of Țaul. According to the report, a majority of people from the village of Țaul stopped sending their children to school because the director Plămădeală, wife of the priest Valerian Plămădeală, “all the time scorns the children with the words ‘sons of communists and Bolsheviks you are.’” The report states further, that, “because of this reason, the inhabitants of this settlement are very discontent.”⁴³

The shortages of war further aggravated the relationship between the Bessarabian population and the Romanian authorities. According to a memo issued by the inspector of gendarmerie, colonel Meculescu, on 14 September 1941, the population of some rural places in Bessarabia “was manifesting very big discontent because of a lack of crucial basic goods which they cannot purchase and which are desperately needed.” Meculescu was showing his concern over the fact that this discontent could be further exploited by subversive elements and was worried that the population might get involved in displays hostile to the state. As a consequence, the inspector of the gendarmerie ordered his staff to “take measures of scrutiny and surveillance concerning this problem, reporting in a timely manner to the inspectorate any relevant findings in this regard.”⁴⁴ However, even in Cetatea Albă, where a harmonious relationship between the authorities and the ethnic Romanian population was reported, the municipal Siguranța bureau did not fail to notice that “the spirit of

the Romanian population is very good, except for small dissatisfactions manifested when members of the population are requisitioned for forced labor.”⁴⁵

Frequently, Bessarabian refugees who came back to Bessarabia after July 1941 were the harshest critics of the alleged lack of loyalty towards the Romanian state on part of the population who had stayed during the Soviet occupation. An informative note by the legion of gendarmes from Lăpușna registers that the Bessarabian refugees from this locality considered the best form of government for Bessarabia to be “a military dictatorship of the most severe character,” because its inhabitants “do not have any national conscience” and they “are indifferent if today the tricolor flag is fluttering or the red banner.”⁴⁶

Yet, not all Bessarabian refugees shared these radical opinions. Vladimir Cristi, whom we mentioned above, displayed a completely different attitude.⁴⁷ On 6 October 1941 he sent a memorandum to the governor of Bessarabia, in which he expressed his point of view regarding the state of affairs within reconquered Bessarabia and, simultaneously, offered some suggestions for a more efficient administration of the province. Cristi was highlighting the favourable attitude of peasants towards the Romanian administration, especially invigorated by the abuses undertaken by the Soviet administration. In his opinion, it was absolutely necessary to irreversibly consolidate

45 GAOO, Fund 2248, inv.1, dos. 23, Informative note from August 31, 1941; USHMM, RG-31.014; Acc.1996.A.0115.

46 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, the Year 1941, November 12, 1941; USHMM, RG 25.010M, reel 9.

47 Vladimir Cristi was a deputy to the National Council [Sfatul Țării] of Moldova, which voted the union with Romania. During the years 1938-1940 he was the designated mayor of Chișinău.

43 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941, f. 532; USHMM, RG – 25.010M, reel 11.

44 General Inspectorate of the Gendarmerie, Year 1941, f. 462; USHMM, RG – 25.010M, reel 11.

“this psychological condition of the Bessarabian Romanian so favourable to us,” but this should be done “through a wise policy.” In the understanding of the author of this statement, “the Moldovans from Bessarabia are kind-hearted and gentle, and therefore very easily influenced both for good or evil.” Correspondingly, Cristi was insisting that only wise measures which were in complete accordance with the psychology of the local indigenous population should be applied, warning that “if the same mistakes made from 1918 until the rupture will be repeated, it will once again create an environment detrimental to the state,” an atmosphere which, as he underlines, was fully displayed in 1940, at the occasion of the evacuation from Bessarabia. Unlike other representatives of the Romanian political class, Cristi does not understand that event as a direct result of the unmediated free choice of Bessarabians, but finds fault with the Romanian authorities which are characterised as the authors of “a set of deliberate and unintended mistakes committed during the entire period of the shameful, barren, and demagogic politicking,” that, in addition, was “shamelessly exploited with ability by all enemies’ agents.”⁴⁸ While Cristi’s proposal had a more moderate character compared to those of other Bessarabian refugees, it did not have any original elements and mostly offers solutions which were already partially implemented. Thus, his project was to establish in Bessarabia

“a local administration created from the most select elements of the official cadres from the Old Kingdom, which will work in close collaboration with

48 The National Archive of the Republic of Moldova, Civilian-Military Cabinet for the Administration of Bessarabia, Bucovina, and Transnistria, Fund. 706, inv. 1, dos. 10, f. 16; USHMM, CBBT, reel 2.

honest Bessarabians, who know the local circumstances, entirely avoiding professional politicians, the foams of the 1918 revolution.”⁴⁹

In conclusion, we remark that the image of the Bessarabian population as derived from the documentation produced by the Romanian administration in the year 1941, reflects a state of affairs as it was predominant at that moment in Romania and in Central and Eastern Europe. In fact, the image of Bessarabians as phrased in the language of the incumbent Romanian administration was the result of an earlier evolution in the interwar period, when Romania was increasingly becoming a state based on ethnic ideology, the implementation of rigorous hierarchy within society and open intolerance toward any manifestation of regionalism.⁵⁰ The perception of Bessarabians by the representatives of the Romanian administration was ambivalent. As before the year 1940, the population was viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation, yet their mentality and their devotion towards the Romanian state were considered corrupted by the influence of Soviet ideology and its egalitarianism. Bessarabian Romanians were perceived as the most trustworthy social category compared to other indigenous ethnic groups, essentially because they were seen to be a part of the Romanian nation by the Romanian administration. However, ethnic Romanians from Bessarabia were suspected of anti-Romanian feeling and deemed to share an affinity for the Soviet regime. They therefore did not enjoy the same level of confidence as Romanians from the Old Kingdom and also held less confidence than those Bessara-

49 *Ibid.*

50 Lucian Boia, *Istorie și mit în conștiința românească*, București, 1997; Irina Livezeanu, *Op. cit.*

bians who took refuge in rump-Romania after June 1940. The changes assumed to have occurred in Bessarabians' mentality during the year of Soviet occupation stirred great anxieties among the Romanian administration. The civilian population of Bessarabia was blamed for the atrophy of sentiments of discipline, respect, and hierarchy after contact with the new "egalitarian" rule of the Soviet Union. In line with this perception, an order was given to appoint primarily natives of the Old Kingdom and those Bessarabians who took refuge to Romania in 1940 to positions of public service within Bessarabia. Those Bessarabians who held official functions during the Soviet period were to be transferred to work on the right bank of the Prut River, or, in some cases, to other distant locations within Bessarabia. We cannot know with certainty if these measures were part of a temporary project or if they were meant to become a longer-term policy. However, it is apparent that in the vision of the Romanian administration, Bessarabians were supposed to undergo a process of "rehabilitation" before regaining full membership in the Romanian nation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Diana Dumitru is an Associate Professor of History at "Ion Creangă" State Pedagogical University of Moldova. Her fields of expertise include the Holocaust in Eastern Europe, Soviet history, ethnic relations, nationalism, and the politics of history. Dr. Dumitru has been awarded numerous fellowships and grants, including a Visiting Scholarship for Research at the University of Toronto's Centre for European, Russian, and Eurasian Studies (2010), a Ronald and Eileen Weiser Professional Development Award for Study and Research at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor (2009).

Diana Dumitru's publications: *Great Britain and the Union of the Romanian Principalities (1856-1859)*, 2010; her second forthcoming book focusses on the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the Soviet Union and Romania between 1918 and 1945. Her articles have been published in *World Politics*, *Holocaust and Genocide Studies*, *Yad Vashem Studies*, and *Cahiers du monde russe*, among others.

E-mail: DumitruDI@gmail.com