

## Moldova: A Borderland's Fluid History

This special issue of *Euxeinos* focuses on the historical transformation that occurred in a territory where various political and cultural influences met and mingled, and which today is known as the Republic of Moldova. Strongly influenced by the competing expansionist ambitions and “civilizing” missions of the powerful political entities that historically controlled this part of the world, the indigenous population was subjected to multiple cultural fractures and overlaying stratifications under Ottoman, Tsarist, Romanian, and Soviet dominance. Nine articles explore the history of this region through a selection of events, which arguably form a crucial timeline for the destiny of the populace inhabiting this land. When read in their entirety, these studies will assist the reader in scrutinizing the dense and curious history of this borderland zone and contemplating the metamorphoses of the locals’ identity.

The current volume is structured around the most decisive years of the history of Bessarabia and Transnistria, with an exclusive focus on the 19th and the 20th centuries. Each of the included studies explores a particular year which brought a major political change – usually a transfer from one polity to another – to this land, and which had significant cultural, social, and economical effects for local residents. Specifically, the authors chose to weave their accounts around the years 1812, 1878, 1918, 1924, 1940, 1941, 1956, and 1991. While the authors focused on somewhat obvious historical milestones in their selection of years, they took a more offbeat path in their choice of explored subjects. The editors of this volume hope that this felicitous combination of structure and content will allow the reader to familiarize him or herself with the highlights of Moldovan history and, at the same time, gain a deeper understanding of the key

issues consuming the local society over time. While clearly differing in terms of timing and categories of interest, the selected topics of the case studies do not have a spasmodic character. All articles are deeply anchored in the investigation of this region’s transition from one polity to another and in their ensemble aim to provide the reader with a panoramic view of Moldovan history and a proper grasp of the transformations at the grass-root level during the cardinal political changes. The authors stress various processes and models of modernization put into motion during the 19th and 20th centuries in this region. They take note of the actions promoted by the incumbent empire, nation-state, or federal formation, and examine the incongruous involvement in these actions both of the regional elites (political and intellectual), as agents of reformation or mediators, and the masses – “the people” – either as a target public, or as a legitimating discourse.

As mentioned earlier, the territory investigated by these studies has the idiosyncrasy of a borderland. As many historians will be forced to agree, until the 20th century Bessarabia (and in particular Transnistria) could not be described as a realm of cultural and intellectual buoyancy. When integrated into various state formations, the perceived core mission of this peripheral area was predominantly a strategic one, either of a defensive or of an expansionist character. It is revealing in this sense that the majority of illustrious personalities selected by historians as “Romanian Bessarabians” or as “Moldovans” were educated and established themselves outside Bessarabia until the beginning of the 20th century: in Constantinople, in Russia’s capital, or in the western part of the Principality of Moldova. The economic and cultural development of Bessarabia and Transnistria sped up during the 20th century,

when some of the modernizing and “high-modernist” models of social engineering and national construction started to be tested in order to integrate the population of this territory into rivaling states / political regimes (correspondingly Romania and the USSR). In all these cases the models of political governance and identification imposed on the population of this region were imported from the outside and were not an “autochthonous” production of the indigenous elites.

The peripheral status of the region during the last two centuries and earlier profoundly shaped not only the identity of its inhabitants, but also demographic, economic, and cultural processes as well as the practices of governing political regimes, and the survival strategies of the local population. The articles in this volume tend to suggest that one of the major concerns of various incumbent regimes continued to be the unsettled sense of loyalty of the population of this land. Accordingly, the authors’ attention gravitates towards the interactions between the freshly established authorities (be it 1812, 1918, 1940, or 1941) and the indigenous population of this region, both elites and “masses.” As visible from these studies, local elites and ordinary people were cautiously embracing strategies of integration, accommodation and self-preservation, while facing the centralizing and homogenizing efforts of new centers of political power and dealing with the new authorities and their implanted elites. The painful transition from one administration to another usually forced the locals to make significant efforts to legitimize themselves and adapt to the rules and criteria imposed by new authorities. These efforts varied widely from integration into the new structures of the incumbent regime and to the refusal or inability to cooperate with the new authorities. Simultaneously, the new authori-

ties were compelled to adjust their strategies of governance towards the local population, either attempting to find a *modus vivendi* with the institutions, laws, and indigenous customs, or through their radical transformation, sometimes by using repressive means.

The studies by Victor Taki and Andrei Cușco highlight these careful acts of balancing these opposite principles of power after the incorporation of the territory between Prut and Dniester into the Russian Empire in 1812. The authors manage to detail the heterogeneous and frequently contradictory attempts of the tsarist bureaucrats to define the status and functioning of this new gubernia, while contemplating what would be the appropriate model for governance of this region. In doing so, they aim to effectively fit together both the local traditions and the interests and ambitions of the empire. The administrative and symbolic formation of this gubernia was, in the end, the point of convergence and the fruit of compromise between seemingly contradictory visions, but in essence it projected together the expansionist ambition of the Russian Empire and its “civilizing mission.” After the second half of the 19th century, once the Romanian national state was created, Bessarabia became a zone of interest of the Romanian national project. As Cușco demonstrates, the contested character of the region did not crystallize in the form of two coherent and continuous narratives that spanned during the whole pre-World War I period. Yet some moments of heightened discursive tension between the Russian and Romanian polities clearly indicated the “symbolic competition” over Bessarabia among the neighboring rivals.

It was only after the end of the World War I, under an international context favorable for Romania, that Bessarabia became part of the Romanian national state. While part of this

state, Bessarabia formed an object of fierce dispute between Bucharest and Moscow during the entire interwar period, the latter claiming its own rights to govern the former region of the Tsarist Empire. Svetlana Suveică's article complicates the usual triumphalist story of the union of Bessarabia with Romania in 1918. She indicates that the Bessarabian political, economic and social elite did not perceive this event as a radical rupture with the past, but rather approached it from the mixed prism of the past experiences, present confusions, and future hopes. These elites held multiple forms of identity, shaped around the conventional imperial space which cultivated distinct values and sentiments of belonging. Once faced with the erupted social turbulence in the Tsarist Empire, the Bessarabian elites had a difficult choice to face. They tried to carefully navigate through the political rifts of the contemporary situation and trade their primary inclination of belonging to the Russian space (where they were part of a large imperial elite) for the protection of their property and personal security by the Romanian state under the conditions of a raging war in Russia after the Bolsheviks seized power. The status of autonomy within the Romanian state granted to Bessarabia in the spring of 1918 was meant to soften the region's transition from one polity to another and to appease the population's concerns. As Suveică argues in her study, the abolition of autonomy six months later strengthened the Bessarabian elites' conviction that the union with Romania was a temporary solution and that the future of the region lies within a democratic Russia. In their anticipation of a peace treaty which would seal the fate of Bessarabia, the members of Bessarabian elites either covertly or openly directed their efforts towards persuading the wider European public that Romania occupied Bessarabia by force and that

Bessarabia belonged to the Russian sphere. In his study, Petru Negură proposes a socio-historical analysis of Moldovan writers after the annexation of Bessarabia by the Soviet Union in June 1940 until her recovery by the Romanian authorities in June 1941. Going beyond the Manichean interpretation (treacherous collaboration or heroic resistance) usually applied to the local intellectuals' behavior in June 1940 by contemporary mainstream historians and intellectuals, Negură shows that most Bessarabian writers who remained in the territory occupied by the Soviets had a number of individual or group reasons to stay in the occupied zone and to cooperate with the Soviet authorities. These reasons were related to the writers' previous ideological (regionalist or socialist) positions, to their ethnic (Jewish) identity, or to all of these simultaneously. The writers' ideological positions were especially significant when put into the context of radicalization of the political regime in Romania during the late 1930s and the royal dictatorship and in particular international conjuncture. The author also examines the binary mechanism of inclusion and exclusion set up by the Soviet authorities in order to enroll and integrate the Bessarabian writers into the Soviet cultural establishment. The 'Transnistrian' writers (coming to Chişinău from the former Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic), the survivors of a lethal 'selection' of the 1937-1938 purges, were entitled to play a privileged role of 'teachers' toward the Bessarabian writers and were meant to coach the latter into the new Soviet norms and 'language', and to act as mediators between newcomers and Soviet authorities.

The study by Diana Dumitru reinforces the idea that the Romanian authorities were clearly aware of the sensitive situation inside Bessarabia while part of Greater Roma-

nia and of the Bessarabians' mixed feelings towards the Romanian administration. Dumitru's article offers a window into a time of the Bessarabian population's categorical reappraisal – the summer of 1941–, examined through the prism of loyalty and its degree of faithfulness towards the reestablished Romanian authority. The author infers that the conclusions drawn by the representatives of the Romanian administration were ambivalent. The Bessarabians were deemed to be, in a way, "contaminated" by their contact with the communist regime during the 1940-1941 Soviet occupation. Yet at the same, this population was viewed as an integral part of the Romanian nation. Very much in line with the nationalistic logic of an ethnocratic state, the Bessarabian Romanians were perceived as the most trustworthy social category, while other indigenous ethnic groups were suspected of anti-Romanian sentiments, were considered to share an affinity for the Soviet regime, and did not enjoy the same level of confidence. However, the Romanian authorities' resentments (mostly aroused by the humiliations endured in 1940) collided with imperious necessities of their present. If the past demand the punishment of "collaborators" with the Soviet power and the revenge of the Romanian state, then the interest of the present and future brought to the surface the necessity to stabilize political power and to find reconciliation with the local population from this region. In the views of Romanian officials, the Bessarabians had to undergo a process of "rehabilitation" before returning back to "normality." Until then, the local populace could not be fully trusted 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 in Romania after the Soviet annexation of 1940.

More than two decades later after the second takeover of the Bessarabian region, the Soviet authorities were not spared of similar concerns related to the faithfulness of local population. Under the relaxed conditions facilitated by de-Stalinization, many of the repressed feelings and ideas of inhabitants of the MSSR were first voiced in public. Aside from various grievances of economic and social character, the center was especially alarmed by the "nationalistic attitudes" displayed by the Moldovan intellectuals. Even if expressed only by a tiny minority, the calls to unite to Romania, to escape from Moscow's rule, and to become the masters of their own fate were perceived as a vital threat to the Soviet regime. While during the interwar era the Romanian state's primary concern was the infiltration of Communist ideology among Bessarabians, the Soviet authorities' unease was fostered by the idea of the Bessarabians' historical, linguistic and cultural affiliation with the Romanian nation. Indeed, these cultural connections were not obliterated during the Stalinist regime, and the issue of recognition of the Moldavian language as Romanian returned with full force in the post-Stalinist era. In the new context created by the secret speech, the previous attempts to forge a Moldavian language different from Romanian were portrayed as part of the distortion of the Stalinist nationality policy. Moldavian intellectuals favored a rapprochement of the standard vocabulary of Moldavian to the Romanian one as well as the adoption of a common scheme of grammar. As Igor Cașu claims, these efforts fostered a "tacit revolution" took place in the MSSR: in 1957 a new grammar of the Moldavian language was officially adopted, which allowed for the desired rapprochement. This also had direct consequences for cadre policy too, since it implied a renegotiating of the relationship between the Transnis-

trian cultural elites and the Bessarabian elites. The Transnistrian elites were dominant until mid-1955 and attached to a Russified Moldavian vernacular, the one they were educated in before 1940 in the MASSR. The Bessarabian elites, by contrast, were attached to the Romanian literary standard, which was used in interwar Romania when Bessarabia was a part of Romania. Cașu attests that the symbolic victory over the Moldovan/Romanian literary language and the grammar issue had immediate and long run consequences for the MSSR and the Moldovans. It basically prepared and anticipated the agenda of Perestroika starting in the 1980s.

The chronology of the events from the last Soviet decade in Moldova, which culminated with its independence in August 1991, is thoroughly reconstituted by Sergiu Musteață in his article and shows a somewhat ambivalent dynamic of the democratic transition in this former Soviet republic. On the one hand, the Moldovans, like many other nationalities from the USSR, massively expressed claims of legitimate rights and freedoms (freedom of speech, ethno-national and administrative autonomy) in the late 1980s. However, certain data revealed by the author indicate that a large part of Moldovan society (and the entire Soviet society as well) remained hesitant in face of those tumultuous changes. Around the year 1990, the reformist and conservative elites alike carried out an intense political battle to persuade this 'silent majority' to join either the proponents of change, or the forces favorable to status quo. The events of the years 1989-1991 can be interpreted in the light of these back-and-forth social and political dynamics –and negotiations – between the agents of change and conservative forces. This fight did not stop after the declaration of independence on 27th of August 1991 (following the fail of

the pro-Soviet putsch in Moscow). After the 1991-1992 war in Transnistria, and the sudden deterioration of the standard of living in the following years, the majority of the Moldovan population supported the coming to power of a party consisting of the former administrative elites in 1994. The 'singing revolution' of the late 1980s and of the early 1990s resulted in to profound disappointments, pro-Soviet nostalgia and, at a political level, a long 'velvet restoration.'

In general, during the last two decades each of the discussed years and their related historical context have been subjects of fierce historiographical debates and continuous wrangling between opposing political parties as well as vociferous "wars of historical memories (and commemorations)" in the Republic of Moldova. The supporters of a national historical narration and "memorial orthodoxy" proclaimed certain years as the founding years of the nation, or of "our" people, and categorized other years as "black pages" of "our history". The memorial dimension and its polemic aspect are implicitly or explicitly inscribed in the content of the studies included in this volume as well. Most of these studies, which take part in an academic debate with inescapable symbolical and identity implications, present an alternative or even an opposite view to the dominating paradigm of interpretation of history among the pundits and intellectuals from the Republic of Moldova and Central and Eastern Europe. The study by Alexandr Voronovichi includes a fine analysis of the instrumental usage of historical "material" as building blocks for contemporary political projects. His research display the complex political calculations of the Transnistrian political and intellectual elites, when contemplating the potential benefits and drawbacks of the inclusion into the separatist region's legitimizing narra-

tive of the creation of the Moldovan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic in 1924, as the first statehood of the unrecognised Transnistrian Moldovan Republic.

As clearly visible in the history narrated in this volume, the territory of the contemporary Republic of Moldova was never an autonomous geopolitical subject until 1991. As part of this particular historical constellation, some individuals and political actors refuse to accept its

full autonomy and intrinsic legitimacy even until today. In the collective mentality of many people, the Republic of Moldova and its inhabiting populace continue to belong either to the Russian or Romanian areas of power. From this perspective, Moldova was and will still be a fluid borderland for the foreseeable future.

Diana Dumitru and Petru Negura