

CULTURAL ETHNOCIDE IN BESSARABIA 1940–1985

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In Bessarabia and Bucovina, ancient Romanian territories, ethnocide has taken on the form of denationalisation. It's rather clear that ethnocide means the destruction of one's ethnicity as opposed to genocide which implies the destruction or annihilation of a racial, political or cultural group. Not only is education undergoing Russification, but other areas have been subjected to the same process. Russification can be seen in the obliteration of all forms of Romanian culture in those provinces. The Soviets are engaged in a program, deliberately contrived, in which various aspects of Romanian culture are being replaced by Russian and Ukrainian forms. The movement is intended to sever the Moldavian people's historical and cultural ties with their past, an attempt to erase identification with their Romanian heritage. Not only is this a denationalisation process but in effect, a form of *de facto* ethnocide.¹

Historical problems that raise from the treatment being applied to Bessarabia can not be solved in a few words. The more so as the cultural implications given by the contemporary situation of the province don't permit to deliver a verdict, especially because of circumstances, some important parts of the archives are still closed for the Romanian scholars. I don't want to refer to the syntagma "problem of Bessarabia"—that's rather besides the question I've mentioned before, but the cultural identity and the spiritual fate of Bessarabia are, as our greatest national poet said once, "an issue of existence for the Romanian people", "a question of justice".² The aspect I wish to touch refers to some rigid terms within the cultural ethnocide has been unfolded, more than a data appearance. The nothingness of any Romanian traces in culture springs from the Russification policy, dispatched by the Soviet government without intermissions, between 1940, the year of the annexation of Bessarabia and Northern Bucovina, and 1985, the last year I have information about.

Russification as a political doctrine and as administrative practice is something common both to the tzarist and the Soviet regimes. Its aim is the assimilation of non-Russian peoples by the Great-Russian nation, considered to be superior to all others living in the Moscovite empire. Russian nationalist ideology and the techniques of assimilation have evolved over the years, but the aim remained the same: the creation of a single Russian people through the amalgamation of other nations. In order to attain this aim, the tzarist Russification policy made use of certain ideas, such as Russian nationalism, the Christian-Orthodox messianism, and the myth of Moscow being the third Rome.³ The tzarist motto "pravoslavie i narodnost"—Orthodoxy and Nationality—, impregnated by the idea of world domination inherited from the Mongols and Tartars, served as an ideological

front for Russian expansionism. If the declared aim of czarism was to liberate the Christian peoples from the Ottoman yoke, the real aim was their cultural Russification and economic exploitation by means of a centralistic administration and persevering colonization.⁴

It is worthy of mention that Bessarabia had been torn from the territory of Moldavia first time in 1812, as a result of the Bucharest Peace Treaty between Russia and the Ottoman Empire. The Romanian province endured the Russian seizure more than a century, until 1918, when, through the free will of the Moldavians living between the rivers Prit and Nistru, the country re-joined Romania. Bessarabia became again a disputed land in 1940, when the Soviets "solved" the problem with the help of an ultimatum (26–28th June 1940). The Soviet regime took up again the Russification policy, using the same Great-Russian nationalism and Slavophile ideas, in order to proclaim Soviet Russia as the contemporary worlds' champion of intellectual and moral progress. This time, religious messianism was thus replaced by proletarian messianism, the Moscow-is-the-Third-Rome myth by the Kremlin is the Mecca-of-International-Communism and so on.

The tzarist and communist Russification policies proved effective to a certain extent, thanks to continuity and to the means of "persuasion" used. As a result of these policies, the number of ethnic groups in the Soviet Union was considerably reduced—from 186 in 1926, to some 100 in 1970—and this considering those groups which were sufficiently important to be called nationalities.⁵ With the Soviet census of 1970, the number of non-Russians who declared Russian to be their mother tongue began to rise until it reached 13,800,000, which is 3,600,000 more than in the 1959 census. This proves the success of linguistic Russification, which represents the first step in the process of ethnic Russification. The pace of Russification is more rapid in the border regions of Asia and Europe, where Moscow needs to create a powerful ethnic Russian belt loyal to the regime. One of the highest rates of Russification is that in Soviet Moldavia, where the number of Russians is growing faster than that of the other nationalities of the republic, despite the fact the Russians are as alien there as the French in Africa.⁶ Referring to this problem, a question may be asked: which are the elements that induce such a sustained, unceasing campaign of Russification, with such results, in Moldavia—Bessarabia. This action implies great efforts on the part of the Soviet government and they are based on the acceptance of what an American scientist synthesized: the Moldavian nationalism tends to equal the most powerful form of nationalism found anywhere in Soviet Union, the nationalism of the Baltic countries.⁷ The anxiety generated by the Soviet rules, by the very stifling policy with regard to nationalities, can be easily seen from the Moldavian newspapers, which are more and more critical of the characteristic trends of the Moscow policy. Proves of Moldavian resistance forms against Russification, other than those gathered from newspapers, are represented by the political movements, such as the Moldavian Popular Front.

Further, we begin to refer to some aspects, very important, that may be considered as indicators of the Russification level in Moldavia.

A) The language question

As we said, the Soviet government attempted to give, through language policy, a distinct identity to the inhabitants of Bessarabia. Soviet cultural policies in the republic have been dictated by an effort to obscure, and, at certain periods, even deny the ethnic, cultural and linguistic identity of the Moldavians with the Romanians. Upon the denial is based the attempt to create the most artificial nationality of the USSR, the Moldavians, and thus to hide the fact that once was part of the ethnic Romanian principality of Moldavia, and that over 2.5 million Romanians live under Soviet rule.⁸ Language policy in the post-war Moldavian SSR can be tentatively divided into three stages. I use the word "tentatively" since these stages were by no means homogeneously compact, nor were their chronological confines distinct. Features from all three periods may be found contemporaneously, particularly as there were differences in approach to the question of Moldavian's linguistic affinities among Moldavian scholars. This overlap reflected a time-lag in the adoption of each change in course as charted by Moscow and validated by Soviet Russian, as opposed to Soviet Moldavian, Romance specialists.⁹ It is here pertinent to point out that the chronology confines of those three stages are marked by the publications and pronouncements of Soviet Russian Romance scholars and not by those of their Moldavian counterparts. First of all, in December 1951, at a language conference held in Chisinau (Kishinev), the "independence theory" was criticised for its contradictions by Academician V. F. Shishmarev, head of the Romance linguistics section of the Institute of Linguistics of the USSR Academy of Sciences; he gave the example of the Anglo-Saxon languages, while criticising any identity between Romanian and the so-called "Moldavian language"¹⁰. But it has no echo, because in several publications on the Moldavian language during the 1950s, like the *Course in the Contemporary Moldavian Literary language*, was written that the authors assumed therefore the Moldavian-Romanian identity, on the basis of the common lexical fund and grammar, morphological and syntactical system.¹¹ That fact means, however, that after an interval of twenty years Soviet Moldavian linguists were able, for a brief period, to resume where their purged predecessors had been interrupted, signifying the second stage. How brief it was is evident from the re-emergence, in the 1960s, of the theory of Moldavian's "independence" from the other Romance languages which distinguishes our third stage. For "other Romance languages" we should read of course, Romanian. In this process, it's clear that enter into reckoning some secondary agents, such as the number and the percentage of rural and townpeople, just because these data have been changed during the last fifty years.

The demographic changes registered between 1959 and 1970 reflect not only a period of intense urban development, but also a shift in the balance between urban and rural populations; in 1959, the urban population was 30.4 per cent

Russian, 28.2 per cent Moldavian, 19.6 per cent Ukrainian, 13.8 per cent Jewish. By 1970, the Moldavians had overtaken the Russians in towns, constituting 35.1 per cent of the population there, compared to 28.3 per cent Russian 19.6 per cent Ukrainian, 8.5 per cent Jewish. Thus, as Livezeanu pointed out, "for the first time in the modern history of their land, native Moldavians constituted in 1970 the principal ethnic group in their own towns".¹² In the rural areas the Moldavian element of the population also increased to 78.2 per cent of the total as a result of a decline in the numbers of Russians and Ukrainians living there.¹³ I'll stop here with the presentation of other statistical data concerning the demographic process in Soviet Moldavia; however, I must present another issue generated by those population shiftings. A concomitant of Moldavian's urbanisation is migration, both within the republic from rural to urban areas, and from outside in. An example seems revealing: of the migrants who came from outside Moldavia during the 1970s, 46 per cent were from the RSFSR and 36 per cent were Ukrainians. This fact, added to the reality mentioned before (urbanisation represents one of the most important agents of Russification through the principal state patterns), can offer an image of the gearing that crushes a national identity. The results can be seen in the data given for those who have changed their language or declare as native language the Russian. Moldavian living in the rural areas show a greater fidelity to their native tongue than their urban counterparts, but the difference in retention is marginal. In the 1959 census 1,690,070 (99.1 per cent) of a total of 1,705,788 rural Moldavians declared Moldavian their mother tongue compared with 163,386 (90.4 per cent) of a total of 180,778 urban Moldavians.¹⁴ The corresponding figures for 1970 are 1,894,141 (99.3 per cent) of a total of 1,907,537 rural Moldavians and 357,353 (90.2 per cent) of a total of 396,379 urban Moldavians.¹⁵ For both categories the decrease is very slight. The durability of Moldavian explains why the numbers of Moldavians declaring Russian to be their native tongue has registered only a small increase. In 1959 only 24,382 (1.3 per cent) did so, rising to 46,191 (2 per cent) in 1970 and 82,451 (3.3 per cent) in 1979. By contrast, it is amongst the other populations of the Moldavian SSR that adoption of Russian as the native language is taking place at a steady rate.

To what can we attribute the durability of Moldavian? The vast majority of Moldavians still live in rural communities which are ethnically homogenous and where attachment to traditions associated with their way of life is strong. Despite the official discouragement of religious worship, and the fact that celebration of the Orthodox liturgy in Moldavian appears to take place only in a small number of churches, among them the episcopal church in Kishinev, many Moldavians worship and hold baptisms and religious wedding services privately, although the number of priests able to officiate in Moldavian is said to be diminishing.¹⁶ Now we can pass to the second part of our work:

B) How does ethnocide policy appear?

Some aspects

One of the reasons given for the present state of decay of the historical monuments has been attributed to the fact the administrative authorities of the areas are "atheists" who are incapable of differentiating between "cult" and "culture", and because of this lack of understanding continue their battle against the churches. Because of this indifference many rare and valuable art objects have been destroyed. The effect of the anti-religious movement (it's worth saying that Orthodox religion has been always a trace of the Romanian national permanence), launched by the Soviets, can readily be seen by visiting the few remaining churches and monasteries. Partially in ruin are the monuments of architecture from Causeni, Butuceni, Saharna, Horodiste etc., or transformed for other using, like the monastery of Chitcani. The second reason why the historical monuments of Bessarabia and Bucovina have been permitted to fall into such a state of disarray is derived from the USSR's criteria to discredit and humiliate all forms and vestiges of Romanian specific features still existing in those territories, which can be best accomplished by alienating the Romanians from their heritage and culture.¹⁷ There exists also a comprehensive plan aimed at changing the architectural styles that are of Moldavian origin. Architectural styles, foreign to Bessarabia and Bucovina, and whose aesthetic quality are non-existent, have been introduced, and the original styles have been discontinued. Why? Because the present-day architects no longer have the knowledge since they have not studied that particular style of architecture. The architectural institutes do not offer the traditional Moldavian architectural styles in their course of studies.

The purpose of the new Moldavian literature was to present an apology of the Soviet man and the Soviet system. It was the epoch when it was considered that the "Moldavian" classics had not been subjected to any other influence than that of Russian literature and when the contemporary "Moldavian" writers could follow no other example than that offered by Russian literature.

The Moldavian historians' task was no easier, for they had to demonstrate the existence of a history of Soviet Moldavia, delimited by the River Prut and Nistru, distinct from that of the Moldavia situated between the Carpathians and the Nistru. They had no choice, but to establish that the Moldavian princes had reigned over the whole Moldavian territory from the very formation of the principality, toward the middle of the 14th century, until 1812, when the tzars annexed the eastern half, which they named Bessarabia, and which later, in 1940, became Soviet Moldavia. All attempt to invent local heroes, proper to the Soviet Moldavia, failed. Thus, the obscure "great Moldavian hero" Grigore Ivanovitch Kolovski, one of the organizers of the Moldavian Autonomous Republic, in fact was a very dangerous delinquent.¹⁸ Even in those inauspicious conditions, beginning in 1954-1956, circumstances improved for the development of a Moldavian (Romanian) national culture.¹⁹ Quality improved, too, despite the Russification. Thus, *Frunze de dor* by Ion Druta elevated, according to Klaus Heitmann, Mol-

davian literature to the level of world literature.²⁰ Moldavian literature, invented to eulogize Russian Communism, established the foundations of a culture which demonstrates the ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity of Moldavians and Romanians.

The problem of Bessarabia, or that of Soviet Moldavia, remains open, therefore, even the eyes of a representative of the Russian intelligentsia because the policy of Russification to which this province fell victim after its third annexation by Russia has not managed to change its ethnic character or to erase the national consciousness of its inhabitants. The Bessarabian problem is to be raised in the present in the general framework of the situation of the non-Russian peoples in the USSR, in search of a national life of their own choice. Otherwise, it will be more probable to provoke a violent explosion of her nationalism.

Annotations:

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2. Mihai Eminescu, *Credința în trainicia poporului român*, în *Articole de politica românească*, Iasi, Edit. Librăriei Ath. Gheorghiu, 1941; p. 71
3. Roman Smal-Stocki, *The Captive Nations. The Nationalism of the Non-Russian Nations in the Soviet Union*, New York, Bookman Assoc., 1960; p. 29
4. George Cioranescu, *Bessarabia—Disputed Land Between East and West*, Jon Dumitru—Verlag, München, 1985; p. 196
5. David Nagy, *Soviet Census Shows Birth Rate Still Falling*, UPI, 17 April 1971
6. George Cioranescu, *op. cit.*, p. 197
7. George Savor, *Nationalism and Party Squabbles in Moldavia*, radio Free Europe Research, USSR, 6 Feb. 1970
8. Dennis Deletant, *Language Policy and Linguistic Trends in Soviet Moldavia*, in *Language Planning in the Soviet Union*, ed. by M. Kirkwood, London, Macmillan, 1989; p. 189
9. *Ibidem*; p. 195
10. M. Bruchis, *One step back, two steps forward: on the language policy of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union in the National Republics*, Boulder, Colorado, 1982; p. 105
11. *Curs de limba moldovenească literară contemporană*, vol. I., Kishinev, 1956; p. 31–32; another edition in 1956
12. I. Livezeanu, *Urbanization in a low key and linguistic change in Soviet Moldavia*, part. I., "Soviet Studies", vol. 33, no. 3 (July); p. 335
13. *Ibidem*; p. 336
14. *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi perepisi 1959 goda: Moldavskaiia SSR*, Moscow; p. 90–92; I have also consulted *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi...* (1962), p. 90; (1970), vol. IV., Moscow, 1973; p. 276; *Vestnik Statistiki*, no. 10, 1980, 71, no. 11, 1980, 67; *Tsentral'noe Statisticheskoe Upravlenie SSR, Naselenie SSR.P dannym Vsesoiuznoi perepisi naseleniia 1979 goda*, Moscow, 1980, 4, 10, 29
15. *Itogi Vsesoiuznoi...*, 1970, 1973; p. 271–278
16. Dennis Deletant, *op. cit.*; p. 207
17. Martha Neag, *op. cit.*; p. 212
18. Boris Druta, *S-a pornit Kotovski tânar*, in "Literatura si arta", no. 3 (2319), 18. Jan. 1990; p. 6

19. George Cioranescu, *op. cit.*; p. 226
20. Klaus Heitmann, *Rumänische Sprache und Literatur in Bessarabien und Transnistrien*, in "Zeitschrift für Romanische Philologie", vol. 81, p. 102

I have also consulted:

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- A. M. Lazarev, *Moldovanskaja Sovetskaja Gosudarstvennost' i Bessarabskij Vopros*, Cartea Moldoveneasca, Chisinau, 1974
- Brian Silver, *Methods of Deriving Data on Bilingualism from the 1970 Soviet Census*, in "Soviet Studies", vol. XXVII, no. 4, oct. 1975
- N. Dima, *Romanians in the Soviet Union*, in "Buletinul Bibliotecii Române", vol. VII, Freiburg—Biblioteca Româna, 1979
- and many others.